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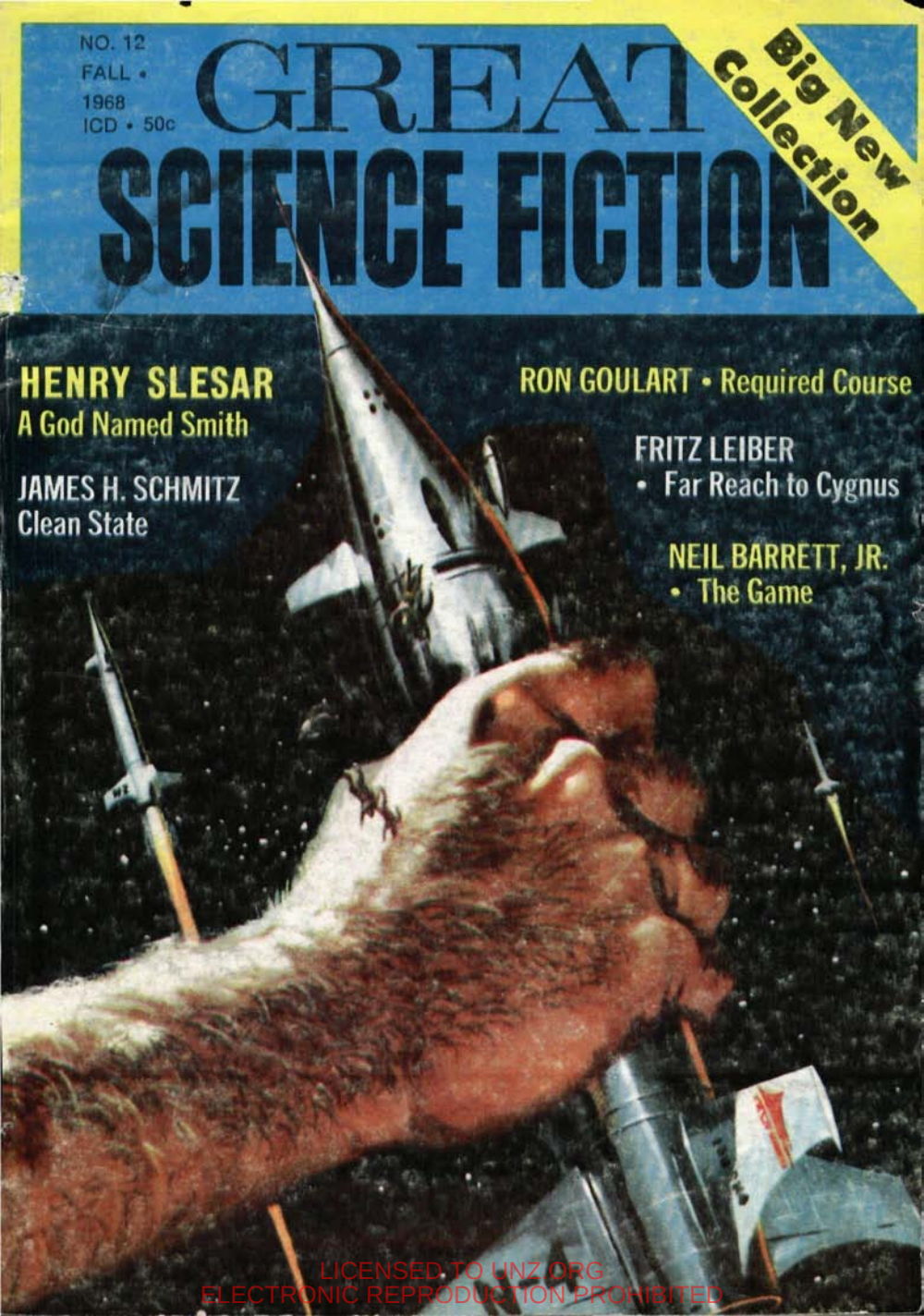

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"Their senses were so numbed, their reactions so dulled—that no one saw it until the creature was half-way up the hill. They were prepared for almost anything—except for what it was . . ."

See THE GAME

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If the universe is a dream of God,

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cannot Man have a similar dream?

A GOD NAMED SMITH

By HENRY SLESAR

"What Man can imagine, Man can do." A sublime premise indeed, but Smith thought of an even more staggering one. "What God can imagine, Man can do," he said. God built a universe. Could Smith do the same?

HE HAD a first name when I met him. He wasn't just Smith; he was Robert Smith or Ronald Smith, something like that. But in the incredible years that followed our first meeting, his Christian name was either lost or buried, and he became simply Smith. Not Smith, the Man. Just Smith. Smith, the God.

A thousand reporters have poised their pencils at me and asked about that meeting. I told them the same story every time.

"Well, there wasn't much to it," I'd say. "We were students at Ardmore University.

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He was the Boy Wonder, of course, only thirteen years old, and I was a sophomore of nineteen. But we hit it off okay, and became good friends. That's all there was to it."

That's what I used to say. It wasn't much, and it never made headlines. But I was shy of talking about Smith in those days. Now things are different. Now I have to talk, or the Smith-facts that have piled up inside me will blow up in some spontaneous eruption, and me along with it. I have to talk, even though there's a thin and icy voice in the back of my brain that says, "Keep your silence, Luke. Smith isn't dead. You can't kill Smith."

I was a sophomore, and I was no different from a hundred other wise-eyed young men at Ardmore University. We dressed the same way, did the same things, shared the same beliefs. Naturally, we were fashionable atheists. The only kind of Hell we believed in was the kind we could raise at frat parties. The only kind of Heaven we cared about was the kind that involved a bottle of 100 proof Irish and an obliging coed. We could quote you Voltaire and Shaw and Joyce and Nietzche. We thought the world was our oyster, but we were cynical about finding pearls in it.

I met Smith on one of my Hangover Days.

I was sprawled out on the cot in my room at the Psi Gamma House, clutching a No Parking sign to my chest, still wearing my best blue serge from last night's binge. It was Sunday, and I was content to sleep until Monday's classes. But I didn't. I began to sense that somebody was looking at me, so I pulled my eyelashes apart and peered out through the scarlet mist. A figure took shape.

"Pardon me," Smith said. "Is this Mr. Wingate's room?"

My eyes widened a little. Smith was something I didn't expect. He was a long-headed kid about twelve or thirteen, with a sad mouth and half-closed eyes and hair the color of dry straw. He was carrying a suitcase that was putting a strain on his thin arms and shoulders.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," the kid said. "But I was told to come up here. My name is Smith."

I groaned and struggled to an approximation of sitting position. I said: "Look, kiddo, didn't your mother teach you

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manners? Be a good boy and blow."

He stiffened, and his eyelids flew open. I found myself looking into twin caverns. Even in my sorry state, the sight of Smith's dark and empty eyes made me shiver. I said: "I'm Wingate, son. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know." He looked around the room uncertainly. "A fellow named Curtis told me to come here, see you about something."

"Curtis?" Gil Curtis was a barrel-chested senior, the class clown. It didn't take a slide-rule to determine what had happened. It was a Curtis special, the old left-handed monkey wrench, the striped paint, the phoney errand. Only why the hell was Curtis picking on kids?

Then Smith explained. "It's my first semester here. I've been transferred from Crowley."

I pushed aside the No Parking sign on my bed. "Now I gotcha," I said. "You're the boy prodigy they've been talking about. Did Curtis maybe mention a left-handed monkey wrench?"

"Something like that."

"You're being ribbed, Smith. Curtis is Society's Funniest Man. He knew I was blacked out here, so he sent you up. You wouldn't have an aspirin in that carpetbag?"

Smith shook his head, and his tight lips made his pale face look smaller.

"I don't see what's so funny," he said.

"Neither do I. But no harm done." I looked at him with interest. "How old are you, Smith?"

"Thirteen."

"You must be a pretty bright boy. That oughta make you the youngest freshman they ever had at Ardmore."

"No, it doesn't." Smith turned towards the door. "I'm a senior." There was more than a tinge of superiority in his tone.

I didn't see Smith for a couple of weeks after that, until pledging time rolled around. We had a typically unparliamentary meeting in the frat house, and somebody mentioned his name as a candidate, half-serious, half-joking. Somebody said:

"You'll have to admit he's a novelty. And he's got brains. We could use a few brains around this dump."

"Why'd he leave Crowley College?" I asked. "And in his senior year?"

"Dunno. Some kind of trouble or other."

"Nuts," Gil Curtis said. "We don't want any runny-

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nosed kid around here. I say no."

We put it to a vote, and there was a limp raising of hands on the issue. For some perverse reason, I voted to pledge Smith. But I was the only one.

That same afternoon, I had the bad fortune to be walking in the same direction as Gil Curtis. He das loud-mouthed and clownish as usual as he strolled beside me, and when he spotted the frail form of Smith coming in the other direction, his eyes lit up.

"Hey, here comes the egg-head."

"Lay off," I growled. But it was too late; Curtis put out a beefy hand and laid it on Smith's small flat chest, blocking his path.

"Hey, junior," he said. "How's the left-handed monkey wrench coming?"

Smith looked at him without blinking. "I think I've found one all right. I'm staying at the Ivy House, if you'd care to take a look at it."

Curtis smothered a guffaw. "Sure, Junior, let's have a peek. You coming, Luke?"

I said yes, and the three of us cut across the campus towards the auxiliary dormitory building that had been added to the University structures with the increased enrollment. Smith had a small, bare room on the third floor, and it looked even more cramped due to a conglomeration of electronic apparatus he had brought with him from Crowley. I surveyed the confused mass of equipment, and recalled hearing that Smith was some kind of scientific prodigy. I was a journalism student myself, and any gadget more complex than an electric razor made me want to lie down with a cold compress on my head.

Smith threaded his way through the junk, and picked up a shiny-new wrench from some canvas-covered object in the corner. He handed it to Curtis, and the buffoon took it in his right hand, an uncertain sneer on his face.

"Very funny," he said, hefting the tool. "You're not just a genius, you're a real comedian."

"Try it," the kid said coldly. He handed Curtis a large nut and bolt. "Take this apart. If you can."

I watched Curtis grab the nut-and-bolt from the kid's hand and apply the wrench. No matter how he twisted, the nut wouldn't turn. Finally, he took it off by hand and examined the screw-thread.

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"It's not the thread," Smith said. "The thread is right-handed. It's the wrench that's left-handed."

"A real comedian," Curtis muttered. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't remove the nut. His fleshy face began to redden, and his neck swelled.

Smith said: "I guess you didn't understand me, Mr. Curtis. It's a left-handed monkey wrench. That means you have to use your left hand."

Curtis glared, and switched the wrench to his other hand. When he applied it to the nut, it slipped easily off the bolt. He stared at the pieces in his hand, cursed, and threw everything on the bed. Then he stalked out.

I stayed behind, and watched the kid pick up his tool and put it away. Then he started fooling with his electronic set-up. There wasn't much expression on his face, not even a small glow of triumph. I said: "What kind of a trick was that?"

"Simple," he shrugged. "I just sent an ordinary wrench through a Moebius-warp. It came back in a left-handed molecular arrangement."

"Are you kidding?"

He stopped fussing, and turned his dark, empty eyes in my direction. There was a frozen hardness in his face that had nothing to do with his young age.

"Why should I kid you?" he said tonelessly.

"No reason." I shrugged and went to the door. Something made me turn back and say: "I hope you like it here, Smith."

It's hard to say whether the monkey-wrench episode was the beginning of the friendship between Smith and myself. It was a juiceless relationship; Smith wasn't somebody you could warm up to. We spent time together after class, and once in a while we'd go down to the coffee shop and talk. That is, Smith talked. Not about himself, but about the work he was doing, his studies, his plans for future research. It didn't take long to get the impression that there was contempt in Smith's attitude towards his instructors, and I began to realize that the student-teacher roles were hopelessly disjointed. Smith knew more about physics, mathematics, cosmology, and practically every other science than anybody on the staff, and there was an atmosphere of despair among the faculty.

Before long, I realized that

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my friendship with Smith was costing me the friendship of virtually every other student. I guess I was always an outgoing kind of personality, and it was hard for me to believe that I wasn't wanted in any society. But that truth was spelled out for me clearly. Especially when my own fraternity brothers sent a delegation to tell me my status. Curtis was the ringleader and spokesman, and he put the case bluntly. Stop hanging around Smith, or quit the fraternity. I got hotheaded at the crude proposition, and told them all to perform a freak biological act. Then I stormed up to my room and packed my bags.

That was how Smith and I got to share a room at Ivy House. And that was how I discovered the Bible.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Smith had taken the train into the city to attend some scientific symposium or other. I was in my favorite position, horizontal, on the bed, having a cozy dream about a redhead. I woke up around two, and drifted around the room with the vague idea of reading a book. Usually, I passed up the books on Smith's shelf, having little interest in the jawbreaker titles that lined it. But this time, I looked, and with some surprise, spotted a dogeared edition of the Old Testament. I lifted it out, and opened the first cover. There was an Ex Libra stamp that said: "TO OUR CHAMPION BIBLE STUDENT, FROM REV. HARLOW MOORE."

The first page read: *"The Holy Bible, translated out of the original tongues in the year of our Lord MDCXI."*

I flipped the pages of dedication to King James. When I came to the First Book of Moses called Genesis, my eyes went wide as I saw the pencilled corrections on the text. Reading with Smith's changes, the first paragraph read:

"In the beginning Smith created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of Smith moved upon the face of the waters. And Smith said, Let there be light; and there was light . . ."

I have to admit it. Atheist as I professed to be, the sight of that altered page turned me cold and fearful. I looked out of the window as if expecting to see God's revengeful lightning crackling over

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the peaceful campus of Ardmore University. The fact that Smith had rewritten God out of the Bible seemed like the ultimate blasphemy, and I felt as if my very reading of Smith's revisions had entangled me inextricably with Smith's own brand of damnation.

"*And Smith said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And Smith made the firmament . . .*"

I closed the book and put it back on the shelf. Then I hurried back to the bed and sat down.

Was it some kind of prank? I shook my head. If anything, Smith was humorless. Perhaps it was some kind of twisted vengeance Smith was taking upon the world; maybe it was a simple case of childish rebellion over a restricted childhood. Maybe he'd been tormented by fanatical parents, driven into a religious scholasticism which he had secretly hated. The explanation seemed logical, but I couldn't let it go at that. I had to know more.

So I asked Smith.

He returned from the city at eight that evening, his small face showing that peculiar exhaltation that any scientific conversation produced in him. When I made a casual reference to the altered Bible, his features froze again.

"Don't mess with my things, Luke. I've asked you before."

I displayed some of my famous temper, and slammed out of the room.

I spent a couple of hours getting solitary drunk. When I returned to Ivy House, I was singing a hymn at the top of my lungs. Nobody heard it; the students were all at frat parties or in town. Nobody but Smith.

He said: "Luke, I want to show you something."

"Show me what?"

"Something to do with that Bible you saw. I've thought about showing you for sometime, but I didn't know if you could keep the secret."

"Say, listen—" I said thickly.

"Never mind. Just look at this."

He walked to the corner of the room, towards the large object that remained covered by canvas. He whipped off the concealing cloth, and I saw that the object underneath was a tall cabinet about the height of a man, and four feet wide, the top

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half glass-enclosed, the bottom half studded with dials and switches.

"What's that?" I said. "Looks like some kinda coffin—"

"Just the reverse," Smith said. "Things are born here, not buried. Would you like to see it work?"

I shuffled up to it and pressed my nose against the glass. "Don't see nothin'. What's it do?"

Smith started to fool with the controls. The thing emitted a low-pitched whine. Otherwise, nothing happened.

"The glass encloses a group of noncondensible gases," Smith said. "Like hydrogen, and helium. There are dust particles, too, like water, iron oxides, ice crystals, silicon compounds. You can't see them now, but they're there, just as they might form within the rotating envelope of the sun. This device is activating those gases and particles at enormous speed, causing them to collide. They're being mutually exploded by each other, but are also becoming imbedded with each other's mass. Within a few minutes, you'll see them aggregate until the mass is visible to the naked eye."

My naked eye wasn't seeing so well, but I continued to peer through the glass. After five minutes, I thought I could see the pinpoint of something in the center of the cabinet. I blinked at it, and saw it grow larger. Before another ten minutes had gone by, I saw the pinpoint enlarge into a ball almost an eighth of an inch in circumference.

"What the hell is it?" I said.

"It's a world," Smith answered.

"A what?"

"A small planet. A very small planet, created out of an artificial cosmos. Right now, its heat intensity is almost great enough to shatter the retaining glass. So we'll have to start the cooling process."

He tugged at a switch on the panel, and I saw his small face go white.

"What's wrong?"

"The refrigeration switch is jammed. Something's wrong."

"Can't you fix it?"

"There isn't any time—"

I put my hand over his small fingers and tried to help, but even our combined strengths didn't do any good. I suddenly realized that Smith's anxiety was serious;

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I'd never seen so much emotion on his face.

"Still growing," I said, looking into the cabinet. I put my hand on the glass and yanked it away. "Ouch! The damned thing is *hot*."

"We'll have to do something!" Smith's eyes were wild. Right then, he seemed like nothing more than a frightened kid. "If we don't stop the process—"

"Hey! Is this thing dangerous?"

"Get out of here!" Smith screamed at me. "Warn them! Get them out of the building!"

I hesitated. "There's nobody in the building. Just us."

"Then get out of here, Luke! There isn't much time—"

I took one look at the cabinet glass, and saw it begin to glow ugly white. "How about you?"

"I've got to try—"

"Nuts to that," I said, and put my arms around Smith's narrow waist, yanking him off the controls. He began to kick at me, screaming shrilly, while I tried to drag him towards the door. There was a hum in the cabinet that seemed to be coming from the expanding, spinning speck inside the glass, and I could actually feel the room growing warmer.

"Let me down!" he screamed. "Let me down, Luke!"

"Sorry, pal." There was unusual strength in his scrawny frame, and I remembered something I'd learned in swimming class. I cocked my right arm and let go a short, snappy punch to the kid's chin. He sagged unconscious into my arms, and I hoisted his light body over my shoulder. Then, with one backward look at the menacingly glowing gadget in the room, I headed out the door and down the stairs.

I was halfway across the campus when Ivy House was destroyed, in a shattering explosion that knocked out windows in the village twelve miles away.

The story of Smith's expulsion from Ardmore University is well known, and there's nothing I can add that can't be found in the newspaper accounts. The feature writers really had a field day with the item, no matter how hard the Ardmore faculty tried to put a clamp on the details. It was one of the standard silly season stories newsmen rely on: the scientist fooling around his homemade laboratory and blowing

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up the building. It was good for a chuckle on a lazy Sunday afternoon, and it served to confirm the popular notion that scientists, as a class, were a pretty dunderheaded lot.

It was on the day of Smith's departure from the Ardmore railway station that I first learned any facts concerning Smith's childhood. I helped him carry his bags to the train, but the 6:42 arrived late, and we got to talking.

His father had died when he was three, and his mother had been a solid, God-fearing woman who was frightened by her son's precocious abilities, and thought that a heavy dose of religious training would perhaps balance his intense interest in the sciences. His only contribution to that training had been his astonishing feat of learning the Bible, Old Testament and New, by rote, word for word. Thus the award from Reverend Harlow Moore. Then his mother had been killed in an air crash, and an uncle named Howard Cherney had been appointed Smith's guardian. Cherney had no qualms about Smith's genius; he immediately arranged for his formal education, and witnessed Smith's incredible progress through every school grade, leading to his enrollment, at the age of ten, in Crowley College.

Smith stopped reminiscing at this point, as if reluctant to reveal the reason why he had transferred to Ardmore in his senior year. But it was obvious that he had run into similar troubles at Crowley.

When the train pulled in, Smith turned to me and said:

"I haven't thanked you, Luke. I want to now."

"What for?"

"For my life, of course. My life is very important to me. Important to you, too, for that matter."

I gagged a little at that speech, but swallowed hard and stuck out my hand.

"Lots of luck, kid," I said. "And take it easy on the world-building."

"I'll know better next time," Smith said.

He got on the train, a pathetic and fragile little figure, toting a bag too heavy for him. I didn't see him again for six years, and when I did, he was well on his way to becoming Smith, the God.

On graduation from the University, I talked my way into a cub's job on the *Times-Express*. It was a nice little

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plum, and there were forty guys in my graduating class that were keening for the opportunity. I must admit that I used my association with Smith to develop the lead. My first contribution was a series of articles about Smith, that rapidly developed into a popular series concerning other "wild-eyed" scientists. I knew I was feeding a myth, but my conscience didn't trouble me. I was a reporter; that was all that mattered.

After a while, the series ran its course, and I settled down into the real drudgery of newspaper work. It was three years before I could call myself a full-fledged reporter, and even then my assignments were on the minor side. I didn't earn a byline until my fifth year on the job, but when I did, you can be sure my circle of friends knew all about it.

Among those friends was Evelyn.

Evelyn was a fresh-faced kid only a couple of years my junior, and sassy as they come. Young as she was, Evelyn was already an accomplished actress, with two fat stage roles behind her. I guess I was attracted by the facts of her success more than her beauty; that came later. She had a lovely, impish face, wore her golden hair mannishly short, and had a star-quality in her eyes, a brightness that made heads turn in the street. I think Evelyn knew that I wasn't such a big-shot journalist as I pretended to be, but she also didn't care.

It was Evelyn who brought Smith back into my life, quite accidentally. I had been dating her casually, so had no real reason to take offense at meeting her with somebody else draped on her arm. But somehow, my temper got triggered when I saw her strolling into a restaurant with a man more than twice her age.

I called on her the next day, and began to ask questions.

"None of your business," she said, curling up on the sofa and looking mischievous. "I like older men. They have an air."

"They have an air, all right. And it smells like money, I'll bet."

"At least they're honest. They don't pretend to be what they're not. Howard doesn't, anyway."

"Howard who?"

"Howard Cherney, the man you saw last night. He's really *very* nice."

"And rich?"

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"And rich. He's some kind of patent attorney, I think. From what he told me, he's worth something like eighteen or twenty million dollars."

I frowned at her. "I didn't think you were the type."

"Oh, don't be so moral. Can't I like a rich man?"

"Sure, but—hey, wait a minute. This guy's name is familiar." I chewed on my lip and tried to jog my memory. Finally, I came up with: "Smith. That's where I heard it."

"You mean that creepy college chum of yours?"

"He had an uncle named Howard Cherney. He became his guardian when Smith's mother died. The thing fits. Maybe the patents he's attorneying for are Smith's patents. Maybe my friend Smith is a millionaire now, too."

"How delightful," Evelyn said. "You must introduce me."

That was the beginning of my new relationship with Smith. Evelyn got the facts from her rich boy friend, and sure enough, he turned out to be Smith's guardian, a man who had made a fortune on Smith's electronic genius. He told her that his nephew was living in seclusion in a suburb called Harmel. I found out where and wrote Smith a letter. His reply read:

Dear Luke,

Will expect you on the 7th, at 2:30.

Smith

I expected to find something palatial, but Smith's address in Harmel turned out to be nothing more than a huge, poorly-renovated barn. When I knocked on the door, Smith himself answered. I had no trouble recognizing him. He had grown upwards and outwards in six years, but his face still had its sad, boyish expression, and his eyes when they turned on me where dual caverns of disturbing darkness. He looked tired, yet somehow elated, inspired by a hidden power.

Our first greeting was hesitant, and slightly embarrassed. We didn't even shake hands. Smith led me inside the place, and I smelled an accumulation of dust and grime and ozone that wasn't pleasant on the nostrils.

"I've been working," he said, wiping his hands on his trousers."

"Understand you've done pretty well, Smith."

"I've done very well. I'm

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almost ready for it now. Another two or three years—"

"I meant your inventions. Evelyn, the girl I wrote you about, she says your uncle's loaded. I guessed that you must be fairly well off, too."

"Toys," Smith said grimly. "The only reason I bothered with the inventions was to get money for equipment. It's a costly business; you have no idea." He looked at me sharply. "How much money does my uncle have?"

It was a strange question, but I answered it. "I dunno. Evelyn says eighteen or twenty million. Don't you know?"

"No. I haven't kept track of the finances; I've been too busy. But I suppose I'll have to start thinking about money soon. I'll be needing a great deal."

"What for?"

He moved his lips in what passed for a Smith-smile. "You should know, Luke. You saw the original model."

Then I remembered the glass-enclosed cabinet, and the tiny ball of growing matter, and the dreadful moment at the refrigeration switch. I heard the terrible whine of the device in the soundbox of my memory, and then the deafening roar of the explosion . . .

"You're kidding," I said feebly. "You're not still messing around with that world-building machine?"

"Not messing around. Concentrating."

He walked to a door that led to the basement stairs.

"Come have a look," Smith said.

We went down the steps, and I halted half-way down to clutch the rail in amazement. Virtually the entire basement floor was occupied by a cabinet much like the one Smith had demonstrated to me at Ardmore. But it was wider; easily forty feet across, and some ten feet high. The bang of gauges and switches on the control panel were multiplied in the dozens.

I descended the rest of the stairs slowly, recalling the holocaust caused by the first device, and not wanting to speculate on the destructive possibilities of this one.

"Don't worry," Smith chuckled dryly. "A simple mechanical failure can't occur again. The machine is controlled by a servo-mechanism that's self-correcting. Would you like a demonstration?"

"No!"

"That's just as well," Smith said, and I sighed. "I've been

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putting the machine through a number of experiments today; I'd just as soon let it rest. Basically, the same principles are applied as the model you saw at Ardmore, although I've made some important improvements. I've learned enough since then to create not only worlds, but actually worlds with their own satellites, and in any orbital relationship I choose. My problems with the world-machine are just about ended, Luke. But I have a far more difficult project underway now—and I suppose I'm ready to concede failure."

"Failure?" I said. "That doesn't sound like you, Smith. What could you fail with?"

There was a tubular metal chair facing the machine. Smith sat in it, wearily.

"Life," he said.

"What?"

"Oh, not simple cellular life. I solved that particular problem two years ago, created a crystal grouping that was bio-chemically assimilable. I trust you won't mention this to anyone; I'm not interested in that kind of publicity. But that's the fact: I've created laboratory life. The problem is to evolve it into something more than activated slime."

"I'm sorry," I said. "You're more unintelligible to me than ever, Smith. I don't know what you're talking about."

Smith pushed himself out of the chair and walked to the other side of the basement. He wheeled over an ebony-black cabinet with a high-powered microscope on its top surface.

"This will make it clear," he said. "One of my manufactured worlds is inside this cabinet; the microscope is focused to give you a good picture of its terrain—and its inhabitants."

"Inhabitants?"

"See for yourself."

I went to the microscope and put my eyes to the twin lenses. Smith made some adjustments for my focal range, and I looked at his manmade world.

It was a rocky, pitted, unlovely world. There were deep grooves and cavities and blemishes on its surface. It was arid and devoid of greenery.

Then I saw the thing coming out of a crevice.

It was sluggish, uncertain of its movements. It crawled with a clumsy locomotion of its gelatinous body, and seemed to be getting nowhere. It was colorless, and

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almost transparent, and completely revolting.

"Ugh!" I pulled my eyes away and looked at Smith in disgust. "What the hell was that?"

"A Smith-creature," Smith said wryly, perhaps even with amusement. "Nothing I'm proud of, you can be sure of that. But a Smith-creature nevertheless, created by Smith, nurtured by Smith, kept alive or made dead by Smith. But unfortunately, without the sense or intelligence to worship Smith, or make Smith proud of his accomplishment."

I didn't like what he was saying, and I began to move back towards the stairway.

"Don't be horrified," he said. "My meager effort isn't even worth that. It's made me realize that there is a limit to what I can do, in the time I want to do it. So I'm through with creating life, Luke. The project can't afford to wait so long."

"What project?"

Smith bent down and peered into the microscope. Then he sighed, and opened a panel in the side of the cabinet. There were four simple dials. He turned one of them, and looked into the lens once more.

"Farewell," he said softly.

"What have you done?"

"Smith giveth," he said, "and Smith taketh away . . ."

"You've killed it?"

"With simple heat. Like fire from heaven."

"You're crazy!"

I bit down hard on my lip as the words came out of my mouth. It was a thought I'd never permitted my own mind to have, and a thought I meant never to express to anyone—especially Smith.

But he didn't take offense. He said: "At times, a little madness is an asset. Just a little. But let's go upstairs and have coffee, Luke. We've got a lot to talk about." He turned and led the way.

We had coffee, and Smith and I sat around for an hour in the dim room upstairs, talking about our college days. I began to relax, until Smith put down his cup and said:

"I'm going to create a world, Luke."

"What?"

"A better world. A world without fault, and a world without end. A world where Nature is subservient to Man, and Man subservient to God. A world where beauty and perfection are more important than hate and lust. A world where Man can live in

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peace and harmony and eternal truth."

I stared at him. The pat little speech had come out of him without emotion. I had the impression that this, too, was something learned by rote, the way Smith knew the Bible.

"Are you serious?" I said.

"Deadly serious. Within two years or three, I'm going out into space and add another planet to this solar system of ours. The problems are vast, but not insurmountable. I had hoped to evolve my own breed of life for this planet, create my own kind of homo sapiens by artificial evolution. I know now that this was only childish dreaming. Worlds are far easier to create than Man. Man calls for time; I don't have that kind of time at my disposal."

I didn't know what to say.

"I've calculated carefully," Smith went on. "I've worked on nothing else since leaving Ardmore. Now I'm almost ready to begin." He frowned suddenly. "Money," he said.

"Money?"

"You're right; I'll need a great deal of it, an enormous amount. You say Howard has eighteen million?"

"That's what I hear."

"It'll do for a start. Do you have any connections in the stock market, Luke?"

"No. Unless you count Briggs, the financial editor of the paper."

"It doesn't matter. I can learn what I don't know. My problem will be to develop a trading system which will give me the funds I need without crippling the national economy. I don't want to inaugurate Smith's world by having a planetary enemy."

"Now, look," I said weakly, annoyed at this last expression of ego. But Smith wouldn't be interrupted. He fixed his eyes on my face and asked:

"What do you say, Luke? Will you join me in this enterprise?"

"What's that?"

"I want you to join me, help me. I know it's a great deal to ask; I'm sure your journalism career is important to you. But I want you on Smith's World, Luke. I want you to be by my side when I create it, people it, manage its affairs, bring it to a state of glory this silly globe of ours will never see."

It took me awhile before I could muster up the right words to refuse Smith's offer.

"You're being foolish, Luke. I'm serious about this world I'm going to create.

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You know me; I mean to do what I say. I'm offering you the opportunity to be my principal assistant. To be—" He paused, and his eyes stopped seeing me. "To be God's right hand."

I turned my back and went to the stairs.

"Don't decide hastily," Smith said. "If the scientific or spiritual aspects of my plan don't interest you, perhaps the materialistic will. If it's money you're interested in, I can make you the richest man of Smith's World, Luke. Women? You'll never have such opportunities on Earth as I plan to provide on my planet—"

"Cut it out," I said. "I don't want to hear any more about it, Smith. I suppose you know what you're doing, and I don't doubt that you will. But let's get this clear. I like the world under my feet right now. I don't want any other. And don't forget, Smith. I'm the old atheist, remember. I don't believe in God; not even your kind."

His face changed slowly, but it changed. For a moment, he was almost pouting, like a thwarted child. Then he was the Smith I knew: frozen-faced, sufficient unto himself.

"We'll see," he said quietly. "There's still time, Luke. Maybe you'll change your mind."

Six months went by before I knew definitely that Smith's plans were beyond the dreaming phase. The realization came when Lou Briggs, the *Times-Express* financial editor, called me into his office and offered me a chair.

I was flattered. The *Times-Express* was an important business paper, and its financial chief a man of consequence.

"You know Smith?" he asked. Briggs was a small, sallow-skinned man with bad teeth. He looked worried.

"Yes, I know him. Why?"

"Been following the Wall Street news?"

"Not particularly. Anything happening?"

Briggs grunted. "Your friend's decided to take a flyer on the market. He didn't do so well at first; dropped almost a million dollars in two days of trading. We didn't play up the story; some of our friends on the Exchange don't like that kind of publicity."

"So what?"

"Well, he's been doing better. He's recouped his losses, and he's been gathering strength ever since. From what I hear, he's displaying

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the shrewdest trading sense since the days of the old Wall Street barons. The talk on the street is—" Briggs began to worry his lower lip. "He's out for a killing. Maybe the biggest in the history of the market. If his luck holds out—"

"What are you telling me, Mr. Briggs?"

"If this madman continues successfully, he'll cause a panic. There'll be millions lost. It's crazy to think that he'll succeed; the law of averages is against him; he's violating every sound law of finance—"

I couldn't prevent the snicker. "If I know Smith, Mr. Briggs, he's got the law on his side."

"Then you think he can do it?"

"I don't know anything about the stock market. But I do know that Smith's a genius. If he wants something bad enough, he'll get it."

Brigg's yellow face got paler. "I've invested myself," he said. "Invested heavily. He can ruin me . . ."

I stood up. "Is that all, Mr. Briggs?"

"Maybe you can talk to him. He's your friend—"

"Sorry. He's not the kind to take advice."

"Goddam him!" Briggs hit the desk with his fist. "What he's doing is immoral—illegal! We'll get the SEC on him! He can't do this thing—"

I walked out of the office, and my hands were so unsteady that I shoved them into my pocket. Then I sat at my desk and thought about Smith, and the more I thought, the more depressed I became. I was glad when the phone rang half an hour later, especially when I recognized the voice of Evelyn Armour.

"Hi, Sara Bernhardt," I said. "I was thinking about calling you. Doing anything tonight, or did your sugar daddy run out of glucose?"

"Luke—"

The choked quality in her voice took the flippancy out of mine. "What's wrong, kid?"

"It's Howard. Howard Cherney."

"What about him?"

"He—he was supposed to call for me tonight. But I changed my mind, I didn't want to see him. I called his office a while ago, and found out what happened . . . Luke, please come see me."

"I don't quite understand, sweetie? What's the matter with Cherney?"

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"He's dead. He shot himself. Something to do with the stock market. I didn't think people did that sort of thing anymore—"

"Look," I said quickly. "Hang up the phone and stay right where you are. I'll come over as fast as I can."

I found Evelyn huddled into the corner of her sofa when I arrived, looking pale and helpless. All the shiny, theatrical brightness was gone from her appearance, but somehow, that made me like her all the more. Suddenly, she looked not only available, but human and desirable. Before we spoke, I took her in my arms. We didn't talk about Howard Cherney's suicide for almost an hour. We found other things to talk about.

I knew that Smith's invasion of the Stock Exchange was part of his master plan for what he called Smith's World, and I knew that he had been callous enough to put a down payment on that plan with the life of his own uncle. But now Smith and his ambitions didn't seem very important to me, not in comparison with the discovery I made that afternoon in Evelyn's apartment. My collegiate, sneering attitude about love had been radically altered in a matter of minutes, and nothing in the universe seemed half so important to me as Evelyn.

We began talking about marriage at once, I began to make plans for setting the newspaper world on its ear. I had a purpose and direction in my life suddenly, and I guess, in my own way, I was as dedicated as Smith was in his.

That's why the letter hurt so much, the letter that lay on my mail stack just two months after the Smith Panic in Wall Street.

It was short and to the point:

We are sorry to inform you that your services are no longer required.

H. Culver, Pres.
Times-Express

I went raging into the offices of the city editor with the letter, but all I got was a shrug. That afternoon, I spent four hours on the telephone, calling up every friend or acquaintance I had in the business, rooting out job information. None were particularly helpful, so I decided to make the rounds in person.

I saw the employment manager of every newspaper in

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the city. Without exception, they pleaded "no openings."

Evelyn was understanding. She suggested I try some out-of-town papers, and I followed her advice for the next two months. In all, thirty-four papers on the east coast, six on the west, and five in the middle states of the country told me the same story.

No openings.

It took me almost four months, until the year had ended, to realize what had happened to me. It wasn't slack season in the newspaper game. It wasn't my lack of ability or experience. It was much simpler than that. Somehow, for some reason, I'd been blackballed, marked lousy, struck off the lists.

"Smith," Evelyn said one night.

"What's that?"

"Remember what you told me, Luke? About the offer he made you? Do you suppose *he* had anything to do with your not getting work? He's practically a billionaire now. He could apply a lot of pressure . . ."

I denied her idea at first. Then I thought it over, and began to wonder. I sat down and drafted a blunt letter to Smith, putting the question in clear terms.

A day later, I got a clear reply, in the form of a telegram beneath my door.

It read:

YOU ARE CORRECT. HOWEVER GREAT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY AWAITS YOU IMMEDIATELY. SALARY ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS A YEAR. REPLY AT ONCE IF INTERESTED.

SMITH

I showed Evelyn the telegram, and to my surprise, she began to laugh.

"What is it? What's so funny?"

"You are!" she said. "You're dying to take this job with Smith, aren't you? You've always wanted to take it, really. I can tell from the way you talk about him. You're Smith's greatest admirer and you hate to admit it. You're not fighting Smith, Luke. You're fighting yourself."

I crumpled the telegram into a ball.

"Maybe you're right. A hundred grand a year can't be sneezed at. I couldn't make that much in ten years on the paper. With a salary like that, we wouldn't have to wait any more, would we?

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There wouldn't be any need—"

"No," Evelyn said. She came close to me.

"I'll call Smith."

"Tomorrow," Evelyn said.

I was the first employee of Smith, Inc. to move into the 87-storey Smith Building that had been erected in Flushing Meadows, New York.

I suppose no building ever erected on this Earth has caused so much controversy as the Smith Building, with the possible exception of the Tower of Babel. Architects were enraged by its outlandish size and freak construction, at the way its curved surfaces twisted back into itself with all the hellish cunning of a Klein bottle. Economists were infuriated at the sudden drain of manpower it caused. Smith hired eight thousand clerical and stenographic workers in the first three months of the building's operation; almost four hundred of the nation's best programmers to handle his giant computors; three thousand engineers; six thousand scientists in every conceivable field; thousands of other skilled workers in assorted pursuits of industry. But undoubtedly, the most controversial aspect of the Smith Building was its function as a recruiting center for the superior race of Man that would inhabit Smith's World.

I still remember the first announcement ad prepared by Smith to introduce his recruiting drive. Many others followed, and a barrage of publicity that blanketed every form of communications. But that first ad is indelibly impressed on my mind.

WANTED

One Million Superior Men and Women

If you believe you have superior and/or mental capabilities, and are interested in joining other men and women of your caliber in the most important enterprise of human history, you are invited to write for full details concerning the establishment of a new planetary home for the human race. This is an unprecedented opportunity to begin life anew on a better world: a world without fault and without end, where Nature is subservient to Man, and Man subservient to God; where beauty and perfection are more important than hate or lust; where Man can live in peace and harmony and

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eternal Truth. Send complete details about yourself to
SMITH, INC.
Flushing Meadows, New York

It's hard to say whether the first national reaction to the Smith - advertisement was shock, rage, laughter, or puzzlement—probably a combination of all. But whatever emotions Smith's recruiting drive provoked, it also produced replies. Replies by the thousands, and then replies by the millions. In three months, twenty-five million letters in all poured into Flushing Meadows, causing a major crisis for the local postal authorities, and necessitating an additional clerical staff at the Smith Building of almost five hundred.

Smith was overjoyed at the response, but his happiness was short-lived. The first eliminations of the letters left only twelve million. The first interview of candidates eliminated another three million. Then the testing procedure began, and it became apparent that the Smith-standards, as personally set by Smith, were far too demanding to produce the One Million Superior Men and Women the advertisement requested.

I had seen wholesale testing procedures before, but never on a scale like this. There were rugged medical examinations, physical tests so exhausting that they actually broke the health of many candidates, mental tests that were severe enough to cause breakdowns among even the most intelligent and stable.

Nine million people in all, motivated by the Smith-promises of Nirvana in their lifetime, submitted themselves to the grueling examinations.

After almost a year of testing, only sixty thousand candidates were marked "ACCEPTABLE" by the Smith-standards.

As for myself, I was given the title of Assistant to the President, paid regularly, awarded the deference my title commanded, stationed in a six-window office the size of a small railroad terminal, and given nothing to do.

It wasn't long before I realized that my function in the organization was practically non-existent. I had no talents that could be applied to either the formation of the plans for Smith's World, or the testing of candidates. My journalistic abilities had no place in Smith's schemes. Once, when I suggested that

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his World would require an historian, he nodded assent and had me recruit a staff of five of the country's most respected historic writers, and merely laughed dryly when I suggested that I become a member of their team.

"You do what you're doing," Smith told me. "We can hire all the specialists we need."

The answer depressed me, but I didn't argue. I knew that what I was "doing" was nothing at all, that my place in Smith's plan was to serve as his paid companion, errand boy, confidant, friend. If I dwelt on the thought, it would torment me. So I didn't think about it. I reported to work every day, shuffled meaningless papers on my desk, read a little, wrote a little, inspected the various operations of the building, and waited eagerly for payday. I convinced myself that what I was doing was justified: I was making money, and saving it towards the day when I could give Evelyn the secure life she was entitled to. When we had that security, I would leave this empty, purposeless job, leave Smith and his egotistical designs, re-join the human race and live the life that Evelyn and I wanted to live.

That was how I rationalized my life. Yet even as I argued with myself over its logic, I knew that I was becoming corrupted in Smith's service, that this easy life and its lush rewards were having a drugging effect upon my will.

Evelyn knew it, too. And one day, she told me her viewpoint in terms that left me no choice.

"I want you to quit," she said. "For your own sake, Luke. I want you to leave Smith."

I tried to laugh off her words.

"I'm serious. I was wrong to tell you to take this job, Luke. I—I didn't know what kind of monster he really was. He's sapping your strength. He's making you into some kind of jackal—"

I said: "Let's be realistic, sweetie. In another year or so, he'll have that manufactured world of his ready to be launched. Then the whole enterprise will be ended as far as we're concerned. We can take our money and live a little."

"Do you really believe that? What makes you think *you* won't have to go to Smith's World, too, Luke? He's so dependent on you—"

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I laughed again. "Dependent on me? You don't know Smith. He's not dependent on anybody. Since when does God need a friend?"

"I tell you he is! In some kind of crazy way, Smith needs you. He won't let you go! But I need you, too, Luke. Don't you see what will happen? It's going to end up in a contest, a rivalry. And I have a feeling Smith will win. He always wins."

I put my arms around her. "You don't know what you're saying. Nothing could make me lose you, Evelyn. Nothing in the universe."

"Don't." She broke away from me. "I mean it, Luke. Quit now, or you'll never quit. Quit now, or—" She turned away from my eyes. "Or we're through."

"Evelyn!"

"That's how I feel, Luke! I'd rather lose you now than later. It would be easier for both of us. That's all I have to say. No more talk will help. You must make a choice."

The next day, I sent my letter of resignation to the head office. I didn't show up at the Smith Building. I told myself that I wouldn't take the risk of having Smith's arguments sway my decision, but I also knew that I was simply afraid to face Smith in this hour.

That night, I received a telegram.

ACCEPT YOUR RESIGNATION WITH GREAT RELUCTANCE. HOWEVER IMPLORE YOU TO PERFORM ONE LAST IMPORTANT ERRAND FOR ME. PLEASE VISIT DR. MARTIN CORCORAN AT SALO LABORATORIES S A N FRANCISCO AND DO WHAT YOU CAN TO ENLIST HIS INTEREST IN OUR ENTERPRISE. IF YOU ARE SUCCESSFUL WILL TERMINATE OUR CONTRACT WITH BONUS OF TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS. BEST WISHES.

SMITH

The reply startled me; it was nothing like the response I had anticipated from Smith. I called Evelyn and read her the telegram. She was equally dumbfounded.

"I guess one more errand won't hurt," I said. "And we could sure use the money. What do you say?"

She hesitated about saying yes, but finally did. I called the airport and made a reservation on the next westbound flight. Then I contact-

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ed the Personal Information Service at the Smith Building and had them deliver a file on Dr. Martin Corcoran to my home.

Dr. Corcoran turned out to be an extremely prominent biophysicist, one of the leaders in his field. He was a virile man of some sixty years, so totally immersed in his work that he knew amazingly little of the Smith-publicity of recent times. It took me almost a week to make contact with him, and still another before I could entice him away from his laboratory long enough to listen to an hour's conversation about the Smith-project.

At first, he was amused by my solicitation, and completely negative. But I had learned enough about Smith tactics to take the proper approach to a man like Corcoran. I painted a portrait of Smith's World that was a picture of idealized research conditions, a Paradise for the scientific worker, free of all materialistic demands, abundant in facilities and funds, ripe with opportunities for work and study. It was the right approach. Within another week, Dr. Corcoran was calling me at my hotel, wanting to know more about the plan, asking questions. The hook had been baited. By the end of the month, Dr. Corcoran was nodding his head yes to the Smith-proposal.

I returned to New York after thirty-five days in California, thinking gleeful thoughts of the bonus Smith had promised.

My first stopping-place was Evelyn's apartment.

I had never seen her looking so lovely. She seemed taller, more ethereal. She had been letting her golden hair grow, and now it seemed longer than ever, spilling behind her back in a glittering cascade. There was a brightness surrounding her that was even more radiant than the hard star-brightness that used to shine in her eyes.

But when I held her and kissed her, I found her lips cold.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Nothing, Luke. Why?"

"I don't know. There's something different about you."

She laughed. "Don't be silly. Was the trip all right?"

"It was fine; Smith will be pleased. Dr. Corcoran is joining the organization next month."

"Will he have to take the test?"

"I don't think Smith will

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ask that. Not for a man of Corcoran's reputation; he needs him too much."

I pulled her towards me, and again I felt resistance. Something *was* wrong.

"What the hell!" I said angrily. "What happened since I went away, Evelyn? You're different."

"No, I'm not. It's just that I've been—well, I've been so busy. Rehearsing."

"What?"

"I've been given a part, Luke. In a new play."

I grinned with relief. "Is that all? I thought it was something serious."

"It is serious. It's a wonderful play; the finest I've ever read. It's a chance like nothing I've ever had before, Luke. That's why I'm so on edge, I suppose. I don't know how to tell you—"

"Tell me what?"

"It has something to do with Smith."

"I don't understand."

"Right after you left the city, somebody from Smith, Inc. came to see me. It seems that Smith hired Arthur Trumbull, the playwright, to write a play about—about Smith's World. That's the general theme, anyway. It's a beautiful play, really it is, Luke. And Smith wants me to play the lead."

I stared at her. "I don't get it. Why you?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't mean it that way, Evelyn. But what's the reason? Smith always has a reason."

"How should I know? All I know is that the opportunity is so marvelous, Luke—"

I didn't know what to think. I didn't like the idea, but I couldn't find any arguments against it. Smith had never demonstrated any particular interest in the arts, no more than was necessary. Was this some kind of public relations scheme on behalf of his beloved project? And why choose Evelyn, *my* Evelyn, for the starring role? There were hundreds of actresses with more stature.

Then I began to feel guilty about my attitude, and said:

"I think it's wonderful, honey. If Smith's behind it, the play's bound to be a smash. He won't let himself be associated with any kind of failure."

"I knew you'd understand, Luke."

I said: "What's the part like?"

Her eyes grew distant.

"I play Eve."

A month before the opening of Smith's play, the first

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Smith-rocket was launched from Death Valley.

It wasn't the first man-carrying rocket which had left Earth. By now, the Air Force Interplanetary Corps had launched half a dozen manned vehicles on exploratory flights in the Earth's orbit, and two successful landings had been made on the Moon.

But the Smith-vessel, a sixty-rocket, 10,000-ton monster, dwarfed anything that had been previously launched into space. Its time of departure, its cargo, its destination, its purpose, were all kept under a security cloud.

Two days later, a second Smith-rocket departed, and days apart, two other ships left the Death Valley desert, heading out to join the other vessels on some mysterious mission in outer space.

I won't conceal the fact that the mechanics of how Smith planned to create his world in actual space mystified me thoroughly, despite my closeness to Smith. Perhaps not even the thousands of scientists now in his employ understood it completely, although many submitted learned articles on Smith's world-building process to their trade journals. I tried to extrapolate the method from what I had seen in the Smith world-machine at the University and his suburban laboratory in Harmel, but the problems of creating a planet away from those controlled conditions seemed so vast that my head ached when I thought about it. Vaguely, I reasoned that he would have to attract an enormous amount of interstellar particles to some central point, and recreate the conditions that took Nature billions of years to produce in an incredibly abbreviated time. The task seemed impossible. But I knew Smith.

Then the play opened.

Few of us who were there will ever forget that first performance of Arthur Trumbull's *The World*. On the surface, it seemed no different from a hundred other first-nights on Broadway, but there was a tangible air of special excitement the moment the audience faced the gigantic curtain in the city's largest theatre. No backstage visitors were permitted, so I didn't get the chance to see Evelyn before curtain time. I took my seat in the fifth row, and studied the program notes.

Then Smith came in.

His arrival created a reac-

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tion on that audience such as no stage performance could have equaled. When he took his seat down front, every head turned to see the man whose genius was at this very moment creating a new planet for the solar system.

He nodded to me briefly before sitting down, and the nod brought awed and curious glances in my direction. I stirred uncomfortably, trying not to feel pleased at this tribute.

Then the curtain rose.

You've probably seen *The World*, or read it in book form, and you know its merits and faults as a work of theatrical fiction. Perhaps you were even fortunate enough to see Evelyn Armour in the role of Eve. But unless you were among the audience on that opening night, you can't imagine the intensity of emotion that play or that performance could generate in the human soul.

Some critics call *The World* a religious play, and I suppose with some truth. But only those who knew Smith as I did realized the deeper significance of the play's action, the terrible meaning concealed in the glib, poetic dialogue. For as I watched the stage, I knew that Smith had subtly guided Trumbull's efforts in a manner calculated not to praise the God of our Fathers, the God of Sinai or Judah, the God of Calvary, the God of Jesus; the God of the Jews or Christians or Moslems, or any other religion, creed, or sect. There was only one God to whom the words on the stage were directed.

Smith.

Smith, the God.

Evelyn's performance was brilliant. Her radiance seemed to light the stage with evangelical fire. But somehow, I couldn't merely feel proud of her. I felt afraid, too, as if the role she was playing was more truly herself than the Evelyn I knew.

The curtain descended to thunderous applause, and when the house lights returned, I saw that Smith was no longer in his seat.

I tried to reach Evelyn backstage, but the attempt failed. I went out into the street and spent three hours at a neighboring bar, getting thoroughly stoned. Then I went up to her apartment, and pushed open the door without knocking.

"Luke—"

She turned to me, and her eyes were wide and frightened over the shoulder of the

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man who was holding her in his arms.

I felt nothing; not rage, not injury, nothing.

"I'm sorry," Smith said quietly. "I'm really very sorry, Luke."

"It's nothing," I muttered stupidly. "Think nothing of it."

Evelyn began to cry, and Smith comforted her.

"It's all right," I said. "Really, Evelyn, it's all right. I understand."

Then the numbness passed, and an emotion too complex for me to name swept through me.

I dropped to my knees and folded my hands beneath my chin.

"Thank you, O Lord," I said. "Thank you for all our many blessings." Once I began I couldn't stop.

Smith said: "Get up, Luke."

"Smith is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ."

"You're drunk," Smith said coldly. "Get up and go to bed, Luke. We can talk about this tomorrow."

"All hail," I said, and ridiculously, there were tears in my eyes. "Hail to our Lord Smith, God of the Universe, Lord of all Creation. Praise Smith unto the Highest . . ."

Then I fell forward, grateful that I had drunk enough to be rewarded with oblivion.

The year that followed is a year I don't like to remember, and a year in which the events following the launching of the Smith-rockets into outer space were public knowledge. You know the basic facts, of course. The fact that Smith's World, a planet the size of Mercury, 3,000 miles in diameter, provided with an atmosphere perhaps even more favorable for the sustainment of life than our own, became part of the orbital pattern of the solar system, equidistant to Earth and the planet Mars.

You know that the exodus from Earth to Smith's World was coincided with one of the most disastrous economic panics in the nation's history. You know the story of the east coast riots, and the unsuccessful attempt to indict Smith on the charge of high treason. The whole incredible tale of that year that has been chronicled many times, and by journalists better equipped than myself to detail them.

It was a year of Hell for many people. It was a year of Hell for myself.

There's one thing I wish to make clear. Without under-

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standing of this point, this whole recording of my Smith-facts loses meaning. The year that I spent in the sanitorium at Boonsocket had nothing whatever to do with the health of my mind, not in any pathological sense. That's a fact which can be verified. I became a simon-pure alcoholic; there was never any question about my sanity.

Nor should there be any doubt as to whether my stay in the sanitorium was voluntary or not. It was; Smith had nothing to do with it. After Evelyn made her decision to join Smith on his World, I sought my solace in the brown bottle and found it waiting for me there. I drank myself into that sanitorium; there was no effort on Smith's part to have me put away. On the contrary—Smith continued to make overtures to me, offerings of money and other help. It seems he never forgot the obligation he felt towards me, because of what happened that night of the explosion at Ardmore University. Say what you will of Smith. He was grateful to me.

I was in the sanitorium for nine months, before I was able to re-enter the outside world.

It was a different world I found. A quieter, more humble world, a world no longer certain of its superiority in the cosmos.

There was no news from Smith's world.

A few tales would trickle in but nothing noteworthy.

After a while, I found a job. It wasn't much of a job: I became the assistant editor on a low-circulation picture magazine, that probably hired me in the hope I would someday give them the rights to the Smith-story as I knew it. They didn't press me for it; they were content to wait. But I was trying hard to forget everything about Smith, particularly as he concerned Evelyn. I knew now that Smith's seduction of Evelyn had begun merely as an attempt to remove her influence from me, so that I would continue as Smith's paid companion without interference. Then the seduction had become something else, and Smith had found a Queen for his new kingdom.

But I didn't think about it. I did my job conscientiously, if not brilliantly. The large amount of money I had earned in Smith's employ had dwindled as a result of my alcoholic year, and I needed the dollars that came in my

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pay envelope every two weeks.

I took a small room in a boarding house in a moderate section of the city. I kept regular hours, had few friends, and slept a great deal.

That was the only time I was unable to keep Smith out of my mind: when sleep came. Because sleep brought dreams, and my dreams brought me a vision of Smith that was repeated without variation; night after night the same thing appeared.

I would see the panorama of space, the star-studded blackness of the void, awesome and mighty and beautiful.

Then I would see a great spaceship leaving the green planet which was its home, a spaceship throbbing with the humanity inside it.

At first, the ship remained evenly on its course, heading for some rendezvous with a better world.

Then the hand would appear.

A giant hand, the hand of a God, fingers galaxy-sized would reach forth towards the spaceship, as if dissatisfied with its destination.

Then the fingers would close slowly around the vessel, slowly encircle it, hold it in its palm, crush it, destroy it.

It was the hand of Smith. I knew it could be no other.

But except for that dream, my conscious mind knew nothing of Smith. It wasn't Smith that troubled my waking hours. It was someone else.

And every evening, I'd look out of my window and see the pinpoint of light in the heavens that was Smith's World, and I would fight off my thoughts of Evelyn.

Then the Ghost came.

I was sleeping when it arrived, and when its hoarse voice awakened me, I thought that the delirium of drink which had plagued me months before had returned.

The Ghost was standing at the foot of my bed, shimmering as if in waves of heat, staring at me with hollow eyes.

I wanted to scream, but my throat was dry.

Then I recognized the uncertain form.

It was Smith. The Ghost of Smith.

"Luke," the hoarse voice said, a grating distortion of Smith's own mellow tones.

"Who are you?" I said.

"You know me. I am Smith. Don't be frightened; this is

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no mumbo-jumbo, Luke. This is Smith, your friend."

I covered my eyes with my hands.

"Listen to me," the Ghost said. "You are not seeing phantoms. This is merely an electronic projection of my own image, a purely mechanical trick. I'm not quite sure how I appear to you; the device is still imperfect."

"Where are you?"

"I am on Smith's World, in my own chambers. This is the first such projection I have made, and it is not a complete success. I am unable to see you clearly, Luke. If you can see and understand me, please signify."

"Yes," I said. "I can understand you. What do you want?"

"Only to talk to you, Luke. I understand that you haven't been well. I'm sorry."

I snorted.

"You are still angry with me over Evelyn. I'm sorry for that, too, Luke. But we have no time for apologies; this contact may be broken at any moment. I wish to ask you to join us on Smith's World."

"Never," I said. "You're wasting your time, Smith. I don't want any part of it."

"You must think it over, Luke. Let me tell you about what my world is like. It is a world of perfection. A world of alabaster cities and human harmony. A world of beauty. Look at me, Luke. Can you see what I am holding?"

The Ghost lifted something round in its hand. I couldn't make it out.

"It's an apple, an apple straight from a new Garden of Eden, twelve inches in diameter. And not one of your monstrous chemical-grown fruits, Luke. A tender, juicy apple, typical of our farm produce, symbolic of the difference between the old world and the new. Our grass and trees are the greenest you have ever seen, Luke. Our waters are clear as mirrors, and our weather is the balmiest you have ever known. There are birds of rarest beauty, and wild life of exquisite perfection. Our cities are wonders, and our culture is already a thriving, vital thing. It is Heaven, Luke."

"Go away!" I buried my face in the pillows.

"I want you on Smith's World, Luke. You will be happy here. There are women of extraordinary loveliness who want you here."

I said: "How is Evelyn?"

The Smith-Ghost said nothing.

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Then: "I'm offering you Paradise, Luke. Will you refuse me for the sake of Evelyn alone? Is that the one factor which makes you say no?"

"Yes," I said angrily. "I'm sorry if it seems trivial to you, Smith. But that's how I feel, and I say the hell with you!"

"Then you refuse?"

"Yes!" I shouted. "I refuse! I won't worship you, Smith! You're not my God!"

"Do you have a God?"

"Maybe I do." My voice trembled. "Maybe you've made me see God, Smith. Maybe you've converted me, all by yourself. Imagine that!" I started to laugh. "You make me want to pray, Smith, pray to the God of Earth. And if I do, I'll mention you in my prayers. I'll ask forgiveness for you, Smith, forgiveness . . ."

I couldn't stop the sobs that came into my throat.

"I'm sorry," Smith said gently.

The Ghost vanished.

I suppose that was the first contact Smith made with Earth since his departure. But it wasn't his last. Five months after the Ghost's visit to my bedroom, the first Smith-vessel made a return trip to Earth, containing a delegation of Smith-men appointed to establish relations with the planet of their birth. They came not as visitors, but as representatives of another interplanetary power to the United Nations.

At first, the UN debated their sovereignty, and their right to deal with the Earth nations as a separate and distinct entity. There were days of arguments among the UN members, and a special commission was formed to study the question. Finally, they ruled that Smith's World was not a legally constituted entity, and therefore not entitled to recognition.

The delegation didn't seem surprised at the decision, and merely asked that the UN set up a trading commission between the planets, by which Earth could benefit from the fruits of the scientific progress made on Smith's World, in exchange for those materials which Earth could most readily provide. There were scientific demonstrations held in the now nearly-deserted Smith Building in Flushing Meadows, demonstrations of electronic marvels that were unknown on Earth. An agreement of interplanetary trading rules was drawn up, and Smith's World was given its

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first unofficial recognition as a separate power.

It soon became apparent that the "material" most in demand on Smith's World was Manpower.

The testing began again, and lights, were burning brightly once more within the vast halls of the Smith Building. The Smith-standards were no longer so rigid, and of the four or five million candidates who volunteered in the year that followed, almost half a million were accepted for relocation on the new planet.

The Smith-rockets left every week, bringing a new cargo of human material to the tiny glowing pinpoint in the heavens.

To make the record clear, I want to state that the plot to kill Smith didn't originate with me. I no longer know whose scheme it was, which member of the Anti-Smith League was responsible for drafting the plan. One thing I'm sure of is that Alita herself wasn't the originator, although I heard the proposal from her lips first.

I met Alita by what I later realized was a staged incident. I was assigned by the magazine to cover a lecture that was being held in Town Hall by a Reverend Moore, a lecture provocatively titled: "Is Smith a God?" I accepted the job reluctantly, but my editor assumed that my past connection with Smith would be an asset in the preparation of such a story.

It wasn't the first time a religious leader had made public condemnation of Smith; pulpits all over the world had been ringing with phrases accusing Smith of usurping holy rights. But I suppose this event had greater significance, since the Reverend Harlow Moore had been Smith's own religious instructor in the bygone days of Smith's childhood.

Reverend Moore was a burly man with a humorous mouth and shaggy white hair in need of trimming. He did no pulpit-pounding when he spoke of Smith. He spoke quietly to the Town Hall audience, a large crowd that filled every seat in the auditorium. He spoke at length about Smith, the child, describing his prowess as a Bible student, remarking upon his feat of learning Old and New Testaments word for word.

"I was impressed," he said with a twinkle. "Greatly impressed, having such a poor memory myself. But I must confess that I mistook this

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ability of Smith's. Our friend Smith didn't learn the Bible 'by heart'—only by mind. His heart was never involved, and his soul failed to grasp the deep meaning of the sacred writings. You have heard that the Devil can quote scriptures to his purpose; well, that means the Devil must have a good memory, too."

The lecture continued without heat or rancor, more of a plea for understanding than condemnation. When it was over, I pushed my way down the aisle of the hall. Somehow, in the crush to the exits, I found myself stepping hard on someone's toe, and a woman's voice cried out in pain.

"Gosh, I'm sorry—"

The face that turned towards me was of such striking beauty that I couldn't help staring. Her skin was creamy white, her eyes vividly sea-green, her mouth wide and sensuous. Her black hair was unusually long, and the total effect was of something pagan. She stumbled, and I put my arm out to help her through the crowds filling the aisle. Even through the fabric of her sleeve, her skin felt warm and good to the touch.

When we reached the street, she said: "They say liquor's good for snakebite. How about a crushed toe?"

"I don't know. We can try."

Five minutes later, we were in a cocktail lounge with a highball in front of her and a soft drink for me, learning each other's names and occupations, and discovering a mutual interest in Smith. Her name was Alita Morgan; she was a fashion designer and model. And her interest in Smith—

"Vincent and I were going to be married in the Fall," she told me, her eyes downcast, her knuckles white around the glass. "Then he got interested in Smith's World, and wanted us to take the examinations together at Flushing Meadows. I refused, but Vince went on alone. He passed."

I said: "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was something that couldn't be helped. I'm glad I found out so soon. If Vince thought some man-made Heaven was more important than me—"

"And why didn't you go? Why didn't you take the examination?"

"Because," she answered coldly. "Because I'm too content with the God I have. I don't want any other, no matter how much Paradise he's selling."

"I guess that's how I feel," I said. "But who knows? May-

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be we're both wrong. Maybe Smith doesn't demand that much of the people on his world."

She was studying my face.

"Luke Wingate," she said softly. "Now I remember. You were Smith's friend in college. You even worked for him some years ago."

"That's true."

"But you didn't go to Smith's World?"

"No. I like it here. I like it even better now."

She smiled. "Would you like to come to a party, Luke Wingate?"

The party was at Alita's Greenwich Village apartment, and there were no cocktails served, no jokes told, no hilarity at all. The atmosphere was grim and purposeful. The two dozen participants, the majority of them men, were obviously gathered by more serious motives than conviviality. They didn't call it that, but I realized that I was attending one of the earliest meetings of the Anti-Smith League.

One of the speakers of the group was a thin, scholarly man of middle years named Burgess. He was a professor of history at Columbia, and he told us:

"The future is already clear. Almost three-quarters of a million people have made the transference from Earth to Smith's World, and as the testing procedures go on, that figure will double and treble.

"But the mere number does not tell the whole story. It is the caliber of the people we are losing. Our best scientists in every field. Our trained engineers. Our most competent artists, writers, journalists, researchers. Many of our best business executives have been lured by the Smith-promises. And that's only the beginning.

"We must face the situation realistically. The attractions of Smith's World are so great that the drain on our most skilled and essential manpower is already becoming crucial. The crisis point looms —a crisis that may well result in a chaos that not even atomic war could bring."

"But what can we do?" Alita whispered.

"Fight," someone said. "Fight with every means at our command. Fight within the UN organization, fight within the sovereign nations, fight with legislature, with pressure, with sanctions. And if necessary—fight with great force."

I hadn't meant to say anything; I was only willing to be a spectator. But at these last words, I said:

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"We would lose."

They looked at me.

"We would lose a battle by force. I know Smith. And you know yourself the accumulation of brainpower on Smith's World. Force is no answer, believe me."

"Whatever the answer," Burgess said, "we must try to find it."

There were hours more of sober conversation, and then the crowd departed. I stayed behind, and Alita and I shared some after-party coffee.

We sat at opposite ends of the sofa, talking quietly. It was the first time in over a year that I had been in such attractive feminine company, and the sight of her slim, long-legged figure beside me stirred my pulse.

She said: "I know how to fight Smith."

I moved closer to her.

"I'm tired of talking about Smith. There's been too much talk of Smith."

She didn't resist as my arms went around her.

"Let's forget Smith," I said. "Just for a little while. I'm more interested in you, Alita."

"All right," she said. "How many eggs do you like for breakfast?"

But in the middle of the night, Alita shifted and rose in the bed to light a cigarette. I muttered something, and she put the cigarette to my lips for a puff. Then she said:

"I know how to fight Smith."

"All right," I moaned. "How?"

"Kill him."

Alita held my arm tightly as we entered through the first doorway of the Smith-testing Division of the Smith Building. I patted her hand and said something meant to be reassuring.

The first clerk, wearing the gray Smith-uniform with the golden "S" on his sleeve, was cordial. He said:

"Your names, please?"

I cleared my throat.

"Mr. and Mrs. Lukas Wingate."

He walked to the computor and threw the activating switch. The machine chattered, and produced a narrow white punchcard. He came back with it, and handed it to us.

"Carry this with you at all times," he said. "You do understand the regulations concerning married couples? If either one of you fails to be accepted, the acceptable partner cannot gain permission to enter Smith's World without the consent of the other."

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"We understand."

"Good. We wish to express to you our gratitude for your interest in Smith's World, and hope your examinations prove successful.

"Thank you," Alita said throatily, and we moved into the first testing zone.

I thought I knew what to expect the moment we got beyond the welcoming-stage of the Smith-testing, but I quickly discovered that the process of examination as I knew it during my employment had changed drastically. The physical tests were no more demanding than standard military service examinations. The mental tests were still strict, but the passing grade standard had been lowered to allow mentalities as average as my own to be passed. The psychological tests were simpler, too, but when the time came for me to face the inquistor sitting behind the cold metal desk, I had my first doubts about my ability to attain my goal.

"Nice to see you, Mr. Wingate."

The psychiatrist was a dry-lipped, narrow man with brilliantly-polished spectacles.

"You're rather a well-known name around this organization," he said lightly, but without humor in his eyes. "Quite a lot has happened since you left Smith-employment."

"That's right," I said. "A lot happened."

"You were ill, I believe?"

"You can call it that. I was an alcoholic."

"I see. And how do you feel about liquor now?"

"It's all right for other people."

He nodded his head.

"And now you're married. That's quite a change in a man's life."

"Yes."

"Mrs. Wingate is a very attractive woman."

"Yes."

"How long have you two been married?"

"About four months."

"Uh-huh. And is everything —satisfactory?"

I frowned. "We were born for each other."

"I see. And if you don't mind the question, Mr. Wingate, what are your feelings about—" He looked down at the papers on his desk as if the name was written there. "About Evelyn Armour?"

"Who?"

"Come now, Mr. Wingate."

"Look, isn't this rather personal? Your boy Smith's invited me up there a dozen times. I'm no different now. Do we

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have to scrape around the past?"

"No, of course not," the psychiatrist said smoothly. "Then I gather that the old wound is—well, closed?"

"Absolutely. I love my wife and she loves me, and I'm dying to be Queen of the May. Now let's get this farce over with."

The psychiatrist smiled blandly.

"And what about Smith?"

"What about him?"

"How do you feel about Smith, Mr. Wingate? After all, it's no secret that Evelyn Armour was your fiancée before she joined Smith on our World. Do you harbor any resentment?"

"Naturally. As a matter of fact, the only reason I want to get to Smith's World is to punch him right in the nose."

The psychiatrist stiffened, and I saw that I had pushed my joke too far.

"Look, doc," I said, with a feeble grin. "I'm only kidding. Smith was one of my best friends, and I don't have any resentment left. We had some problems about Evelyn, but I'm over that now. Now I'm happily married, and everything's changed. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." He took off his glasses and tried to shine even more brilliance into the lenses. "That's all, Mr. Wingate."

At the end of the testing line, my punchcard was handback to me. I gave it to the final Smith-clerk, and he put it through a computor. When it emerged, he handed it back with a shrug of his shoulder.

Stamped across the card, in red ink, was one word.

"REJECTED."

"Sorry, Mr. Wingate," he said. "If you have any questions as to exactly why this decision was made, or if you wish to argue the case further, you may write to the Smith Appeals Board, at this address. If you're unsuccessful, perhaps you will want to take the Smith-tests again, after the official six-month lapse."

I met Alita outside.

Her card was stamped: "ACCEPTABLE."

"What do we do now?" I said glumly. "I suppose all that's left is for me to give my consent."

"No!" she said violently. "I won't leave without you, Luke."

"Hey, wait a minute." I pulled her towards me. "This was the deal, remember? It's strictly a business proposition. If both of us can't complete the assignment, then one of us must."

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She began to cry, soundlessly.

"I can't go without you Luke. I don't care about the Anti-Smith League. I won't go anywhere without you."

"We'll talk about it," I said. "At home."

We were living at Alita's apartment in the Village, but before returning there, we stopped off at the apartment of Burgess, the history professor, to tell him the bad news.

When we finally reached home, there was a telegram beneath the door.

It was addressed to me, and it read:

HAPPY TO INFORM YOU THAT SPECIAL DISPENSATION HAS BEEN MADE IN YOUR CASE. MRS. WINGATE AND YOURSELF MAY PREPARE TO LEAVE FOR SMITH'S WORLD ON NEXT SMITH FLIGHT JUNE 10.

DIRECTOR
SMITH TESTING DIV.

That was how Alita and I came to Smith's World.

We expected to find a world designed in Hollywood concepts, with sweeping skyscrapers and Disney landscapes, where the populace paraded about in clean white togas among green arbors, where the sun always shone and the birds sung sweetly, and everything was milk and honey and sweetness and light.

It was almost true, but not quite.

From the moment we debarked from the great Smith-rocket that brought us to Smith's World, we knew that Smith had designed a very practical planet. Much of its terrain was almost Spartan in its simplicity. Trees were planted only where shade was needed. Buildings were constructed for their functional requirements. Birds and animals were confined to restricted sanctuaries and woodland areas, and the game animals were severely bred and controlled for the purpose of providing food. There was just so much farm land, and just so much city area. There was no surface vehicle traffic whatsoever; the air was utilized for all transportation. There were no arbors for casual strolling, and no togas anywhere in evidence. Both men and women wore modified Earth clothing, made distinctive only by subtleties of color. There was an air of industry about the streets of the city, but no sound of laughter. Uniformed

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Smith-officials were everywhere. I would say that nothing was more immediately apparent than those gray-suited Smith-officials with the golden "S" on their sleeves. None carried weapons, not overtly, and all were exceedingly polite and helpful. But there were so many of them—so many.

The rocket that delivered us to the new planet held over five hundred men and women. But it was clear that we were to be singled out for special attention. After the initial briefing and speech of welcome at the Smith Reception Center, the new Smith-dwellers were herded off into another section of the building for further orientation. But Alita and I were drawn aside by a smooth-faced Smith-official.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wingate?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be so kind as to follow me? You have been requested to share the evening meal with Smith."

Alita looked at me.

"That's fine," I said. "Be good to see the old boy."

The Smith-official's face did not alter.

At the copter station, waiting for the craft that would take us to the quarters of the planet's overlord, we had a moment to ourselves. Alita whispered to me: "So soon, Luke! To get the chance so soon!"

The thought chilled me, and I gripped her hand.

"Maybe we shouldn't. Maybe we should wait . . ."

"No. The sooner the better," Alita answered grimly. Then her dark expression was exchanged for a sunny smile as the Smith-official returned to our side.

We boarded a copter that lifted us above the streets of the capital city, and swayed in the direction of the tallest edifice to be seen on Smith's World—a white steeple of a building, crowned in glass. We were hovering above it in seconds, and the copter pilot was guiding the craft expertly to the landing platform that formed a balcony around the top of the needle-shaped structure.

Upon landing, another Smith-official took us in tow, this time openly carrying a weapon.

First, there was a corridor, stretching towards a white door. We were scanned photo-electrically. Alita passed the scrutiny, but the metal of my belt buckle set off a warning buzzer. The guard asked me to remove my belt, and I did. This time, the metal-seeking

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eyes were silent. Alita and I exchanged glances as we were told to go ahead, thinking the same thought. We were carrying a weapon, but not one which would respond to Smith's warning system. At that moment, I lost some respect for Smith, at his inability to know about the deadly device concealed in Alita's long black hair.

Then the doors opened, and we were in the Chambers.

I expected a throne room, but I was wrong. It was a room furnished in the manner of a supermodern executive suite, with polished marble floors and an enormous crescent-shaped desk. And behind the desk, his dry-straw hair now streaked with gray, but otherwise unchanged: Smith.

I can't recall now what was said in those first few minutes of our reunion. They were all pleasant words, commonplace words about simple things, words ill-suited to the situation of a disbeliever reunited with a God. There was no handshake; there never was with Smith. But he was courteous; there was a smoothness in his manner I'd never known before. He was gallant towards Alita, and made a pretty speech to me about my good taste in women.

"You flatter me," Alita said. "I understand from Luke that you have good taste yourself."

Smith didn't react to the thinly-veiled mention of Evelyn. Instead, he smiled and gestured towards the curved dome of glass that surrounded his quarters.

"What do you think of my world, Luke?" he said. "Have I done things well?"

"Very well. It's not what I expected though—"

"There was no sense in being too radical, not at first. One of our most serious problems on Smith's World is—well, call it nostalgia, homesickness, what you will. So I designed my planet to give us the best of the old as well as the new. In time, there will be changes. I have many plans. I'm glad you've come to share them with me."

I looked at Alita, and saw her hand toying with her hair.

I gasped and said: "Wait!"

"What is it?" Smith said.

"Nothing." My pulse was almost audible. "I—I have a favor to ask, Smith. One small favor."

"Anything, Luke."

"I want to see Evelyn."

I could see the dismay in Alita's face, but I went on.

"For old time's sake, Smith. You can understand that."

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"Surely," he said. "I anticipated that you would, Luke. She's in the next room, right now." His eyes went to a doorway at the side of the room. "She's alone. Why not go in now?"

"All right." I looked at Alita. "Wait for me."

Her mouth was sullen, but I turned on my heel and went to the door. Before I touched it, it slid back to reveal a barren gray-walled room, with one chair. Rising to greet me was Evelyn. The door closed behind me.

What had I expected? What effect did I anticipate upon seeing Evelyn again? I didn't know myself.

She was lovelier than ever, but her loveliness seemed to have mellowed with time. There was no longer a star-brightness about her; she radiated a soft, golden light of a summer's moon. She was dressed simply, in white.

"Evelyn," I said.

"Hello, Luke. I'm so glad you came to our World."

"It's been a long time." I felt inane and foolish, my tongue thick and heavy.

"Yes, it has," Evelyn said.

"Are you—happy?"

"Very happy, Luke."

I frowned at the answer. I wanted to hurt her suddenly. I said: "I'm married now, you know."

"So I've heard. I'm glad for you, Luke. They tell me your bride is very beautiful."

I took a step towards her.

"Evelyn—"

She must have seen what was in my eyes, because she answered: "Don't, Luke. Don't touch me. I love Smith. I worship Smith."

"Worship?" My mouth jerked at the word.

"Yes, worship. He's a God, Luke. I know that now. He's truly a God."

"You don't know what you are saying. He's got you hypnotized. You're playing Trilby to his Svengali—"

"You're wrong, Luke. He is a God." Her eyes shone. "You thought you knew Smith, but you didn't, not really. Nobody knows him as I do. If you could see the things he can do. He can appear and disappear at will, Luke. He is everywhere, anywhere. He can work miracles, Luke!"

"Tricks!" I said angrily. "You've been taken in by his tricks, Evelyn. He's got some gadget that projects his image around the place. He used it on me, one night back on Earth. It's only a machine—"

She shook her head, and there was an indulgent smile on her face. "You're wrong.

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You don't know. You just don't know, Luke."

The door behind us slid open again.

"Was it a pleasant reunion?" Smith said, still standing behind the desk.

"Very pleasant," Evelyn smiled at him.

I walked back into the main chamber, trying to hide the emotion crossing my face. The door closed behind her, as if it were a vault closing upon some fragile jewel of great worth.

"Now," Smith said softly, "we can dine together."

"Yes," I said to Alita. "Now."

Her hand went to her hair, in a womanly gesture. But when her fingers emerged, they were holding a thin cylinder of bamboo. It was an ancient, primitive weapon, and strangely fitting to end the life of a super-scientist on his man-created world. She placed the cylinder to her lips, and a puff of her breath sent the poison-drenched splinter towards the figure behind the desk.

He continued to smile.

"I'm sorry, Smith," I said. "This had to be done."

Alita stared, waiting for his fall.

It didn't come.

Then Smith laughed.

"I apologize," he said. "There is no humor in this moment for you, I know that. But as for me, the spectacle is amusing. I must congratulate you on the simplicity of your attack. Other assassins have been far more clever in their techniques—and never got this far. But a blowgun and a poisoned dart—" He chuckled, but he didn't die.

"I don't understand," Alita gasped. "I didn't miss. I couldn't have—"

"No," Smith said. "You didn't miss, my dear."

Then I knew why our scheme had failed. We weren't looking at Smith at all; he hadn't trusted us to that extent. We were the guests of a spectral host; Smith's body was in another room of the citadel; our dart had whistled through a phantom image, electronically projected.

"I'm sorry to find you still an enemy," Smith said sadly. "I had hoped that things had changed between us, Luke. Now you leave me no other choice but to forget my debt to you."

Behind us, the white door was sliding open, and the Smith-officials were entering with drawn weapons.

It was a shock for me to realize that there was a prison

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on Smith's World; it was an admission of imperfection and discontent. It was even more of a shock when I discovered that the subterranean cells, located some eighty miles from Smith's citadel, numbered in the thousands—and were all occupied.

Alita and I were separated, and I was marched through long stone corridors from one dismal chamber to another. There was little modernity in evidence; it might have been the catacombs of any ancient prison on Earth. It was damp and poorly-lighted, and the officials assigned to its ugly duties bore the same stamp of insensitive cruelty that marked jailers of every period in history. I was fingerprinted, photographed, and treated with callow disrespect. My head was shaved and my body deloused, and my first taste of the food in Smith-prison told me that my God-like friend had little interest in the well-being of those who broke his holy laws. My cell was cold; the walls wet; the cot sagging and springless; the light a naked bulb of meager wattage. It was more of a dungeon than a prison; a storage place for the human refuse of Smith's World.

But miserable as my life in Smith's prison was to be, it was there that I discovered Smith's weaknesses as a God. And it was in the Smith-prison that I learned that Smith's World had an Anti-Smith League, too.

I determined that fact slowly, on those few occasions when the Smith-prisoners were permitted an exchange of low-voiced conversation. An elderly man, with a dragging left leg and a palsied hand, borrowed a cigarette from me one day and said:

"The Earth looks red tonight."

"What's that?"

"My cell window faces west; I can see the Earth glowing at night. It glows redder and redder all the time. They say a day will come when the Earth will bleed, and Smith's World will burn."

I thought he was feeble-minded, and began to move away. He put his arm on mine.

"No!" he said hoarsely. "You must listen carefully. You're new here." He peered at me more closely. "And your face is familiar. Did we meet back on Earth?"

I looked at him again. My throat tightened when I recognized Dr. Martin Corcoran, the brilliant biophysicist I had personally lured into Smith's service during my California

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trip. I grasped his trembling hand, and asked his forgiveness.

"Only Smith is to blame," he said. "Smith and all of us who mistook him for a God. But he is a man, and an imperfect one. I have been here many months, in this prison, and I have learned more within these walls than I could have in freedom on Smith's World. I will tell you what I have learned, Mr. Wingate. Perhaps the facts will be useful to you some day."

"What did you mean?" I said, "about the Earth turning red?"

He looked about him cautiously.

"There are almost three thousand prisoners here. But this is not a criminal prison. Do you see what that means?"

"No."

"These are not thieves and murderers. These are rebels, rebels against Smith. Three thousand out of a population of less than two million. Can you imagine the great number still not discovered and imprisoned?"

"A revolt?" I stared at him. "But how? Why?"

"Why is the simpler question. You must have lived on Smith's World to know. You must have learned about your duties on this planet; duties only to Smith, never to yourself, to your children, to your friends, to humanity. There are no churches on Smith's World; each building is a temple designed for the worship of Smith. Do you know how much of your mind, and your body, and your soul Smith demands? All of it, my friend."

"But how can you fight him? It's *his* world—"

"Perhaps. But many of us have decided to fight. To fight or to die. That is enough."

"And when will it happen?"

Corcoran shrugged wearily. "Younger bodies than mine must fix the date."

A Smith-guard approached us, and the old man fell silent.

As the weeks dragged on, I spent as much time as I could in Corcoran's company, listening to him tell of life on Smith's World: a world without end; a world where Nature was subservient to Man, and Man subservient to Smith. . . .

Then I met the others. Scientists, researchers, writers, engineers, artists, philosophers. There were two of the historians I myself had hired for Smith's World. There were four rocket-pilots among the prisoners, and what I learned from them was startling and deeply disturbing. I met them and I listened to them, and the

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more I heard, the more I wanted to dig my way out of the Smith-prison, with my bare fingernails, if no other escape could be found.

One day, I spoke to Corcoran about escape.

He shook his head. "No, Luke. Smith has been careful. He has executed no prisoners, fearing repercussions from Earth. He is not yet strong enough to ignore Earth's enmity. But he has made certain that no escape is possible. The prison is ringed by a series of radioactive screens. Guards and prisoners arrive and depart by a single copter on the roof, and that is protected night and day, by a stringent security system. The precautions are great; no successful escape has been made."

"Then it's hopeless?"

"From within, yes. But I see the Earth from my window, and each day, it grows redder and redder."

Then he turned and shuffled away.

I had been in Smith's prison for eight months, when Evelyn came into my cell.

I thank God for the strength of the vessels that bring blood into my heart, for if there had been weakness there, it would have destroyed me that night. When I heard the whispering sound within the cell, and stirred to see what caused it, the sight of Evelyn shocked me so greatly that I literally reeled and almost fainted.

But I recovered, and saw Evelyn, lovelier than ever, dressed coolly in white, her long blonde hair flowing behind her like a golden cloud.

"Luke," she whispered, tears glistening on her cheeks. "Luke, it's Evelyn. I must talk to you."

I couldn't speak.

"Don't be frightened. It's Smith's machine, his electronic projection device. I'm at Smith's citadel. Smith isn't here; there's some kind of trouble in the farmlands; he had to go there."

"Evelyn!" I gasped finally. "For the love of God, are you crazy?"

"Luke, listen to me. I have to explain something. I—I was troubled about what you told me, about Smith's ability to appear and disappear. I asked him point-blank after your arrest. He laughed and admitted it. He showed me the machine, taught me how to operate it—"

"Then you know he's not a God. Do you know that, Evelyn?"

She hid her face in her hands.

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"I don't know anything, Luke! I'm so confused—"

I put my arm out towards her, my fingers aching to touch her. But I knew there was only air in the lovely body at the foot of my prison cot.

Then she straightened up and said: "Luke, I want to help you. He's talking wildly at you. He says you're the most dangerous man on his world. I don't know why he thinks that, but he does. He's fighting with himself over you, Luke. Part of him wants to save you, the other part wants to kill you. But he's beginning to change, Luke. All this trouble is changing him—"

"What trouble?"

"I don't understand it exactly. There have been strikes, riots, outbreaks. I don't know why; I don't see why people aren't happy. He's given them everything, Luke. Why should they not be happy?"

I sneered, but said nothing.

"There's some awful movement underway, Luke. There's been talk about a Bleeding Earth. I don't know what they mean by it, but it frightens me. There—there was another assassination attempt last week. It failed, of course. They always fail. But I'm so worried, Luke—"

She began to sob.

"Get hold of yourself," I said. "Did you mean that—about wanting to help me?"

"Yes!"

"Then you can get me out of here, Evelyn. You can get me out right now. Do the prison officials know you?"

"Yes."

"Then you can have me released. Make it a command, Evelyn; they'll listen to you."

She gasped. "They won't! Only Smith can order a release."

"Tell them your orders come from Smith. They're so frightened of him that they'll listen, Evelyn. Appear before the prison warden. He'll be afraid to disobey you, Evelyn; afraid of anyone so close to Smith as you are—"

She turned away.

"All right," she said at last. "I'll try, Luke."

That was how I made my escape from Smith-prison, the only man to accomplish the feat.

I had been gambling with the fears of the Smith-officials in telling Evelyn to speak for Smith, and the gamble had won. Within an hour after her visit to my cell, a trio of Smith-guards came and unlocked my door. They guided me to the roof of the prison, and a copter took me back to

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the relative freedom of Smith's needle-shaped citadel.

I found Evelyn waiting for me in Smith's chamber. But the moment I saw her, I made a mistake. I asked:

"What have they done with Alita?"

Her moist eyes became dry and hard.

"I don't know. What does it matter, Luke? You don't love that woman. You married her as part of the scheme to assassinate Smith. That's the truth, isn't it?"

I didn't answer. I rubbed my heavy-whiskered cheeks and said: "I'd like to shave."

"In there."

In Smith's enormous bathroom, I took my first shower in eight months, and felt the good sensation of a sharp razor against my cheeks. I dressed myself out of Smith's private wardrobe, and came back to the Smith-chamber.

Evelyn was at the dome, looking at the glowing ball over our heads, the planet of our birth.

"It's so red tonight . . ."

"Red?"

I pushed her aside and looked out at the horizon of Smith's World. The sky was red, the clouds red, and even the speck in the sky appeared reddened by some mysterious distant fire.

"It is red," I said. "There are flames somewhere, flames to the east . . ."

"The farmland!" she whispered.

"They're burning the fields! Is that the trouble you meant?"

"I don't know!" She clutched at her throat. "Smith didn't tell me anything. He just said —trouble."

"It's started," I muttered. "The Earth is bleeding."

"Oh, Luke, I'm frightened!"

She was in my arms, soft and warm and yielding.

Neither of us heard the door sliding open behind us.

"Well," Smith said. "What's fair is fair, eh, Luke? Isn't that what the old Bible said? But of course. 'An eye for an eye' . . ."

I turned to face him, holding Evelyn behind me.

"Your world is burning, Smith."

He laughed. "So I understand. Nero's world burned, too, as I recall. But he managed all right."

Smith looked very fatigued. When he came towards us, his steps were faltering. Evelyn moaned at his approach, but he passed us by and went to the glass.

"What is it?" I said. "The Bleeding Earth?"

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He smiled at me, wryly. "Then you know of my little rebellious movement? Yes, the Bleeding Earth. A pretty name for the renegades. Almost Biblical." He put his head against the cool glass. "'*And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.*' . . ."

Evelyn whimpered, and cowered against me.

"'*. . . and Moses' anger waxed hot,*'" Smith said. "'*and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and break them beneath the mount.*' . . ."

Smith laughed, and turned to me.

"Now you see my mistake, Luke. Not to have continued with my evolution experiments. To have relied upon this sorry breed to people my new world . . ."

"Your world, Smith?"

He looked at me sharply. I pushed Evelyn aside and stepped towards him.

"Is it truly your world, Smith? Created by your marvelous world-building machine? Is that how it came into being?"

He said nothing.

"Or is it really God's world, Smith? Did you find that your fine machine didn't really work in the limits of space? That you weren't nearly so capable of creating planets as you thought?"

"What are you saying, Luke?" His voice was still unruffled.

"I know the truth, Smith. You never created Smith's World out of the dust of the cosmos. This was a God-created planet, Smith. Your ships captured and steered it into the orbital paths of this solar system; you didn't 'create' it at all. Am I speaking the truth?"

From the window, the sky blazed redder, and the crimson cast fell across Smith's face.

"You're a great scientist, Smith. No one denies you that. But you're not a God. Not nearly a God. You can make marvels, yes, but small marvels compared to the wonders of God. You can't make miracles, Smith. It's only a pose—a pose of your insane ego. You're crazy, Smith!" I was shouting now. "You're crazy!"

I never reckoned what effect my words would have on him. At first, all his reaction was in his eyes. They burned

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out at me with such terrible rage that I was forced to look away. Then his hands started to jerk, his fingers moving convulsively, until he had to clench them into fists to stop their involuntary motions. Then he raised his arms above his head and began to speak. The words were unintelligible; but they were Holy Writ; I could tell that from their sonorous, rhythmical cadence; but his voice had lost all power to distinguish between vowels and consonants, words and animal sounds.

Then he lowered his arms, slowly, and spoke quietly to us, almost conversationally.

"It's all very well," he said. "This little rebellion of theirs. They think they're fighting for their freedom, but they're wrong. It's not freedom they'll win, Luke. Only death."

"What are you talking about?"

"The citadel. This building. They'll be coming here, finally. That's the logical thing for them to do. They'll storm it as the French stormed the Bastille, crying words of liberty and equality." He made a noise in his throat, and it was ugly. "But they'll be surprised, Luke. Terribly surprised at what happens."

"What about the building?"

"Why, it's not a building at all. Not really. These are the only chambers, you see. Just these rooms, for Evelyn and myself. The rest of the structure is really a stockpile, Luke. An atomic stockpile; the final precaution you might say."

I went cold down to my feet; the very floor beneath me held a threat.

"You're lying," I said.

"I'm telling you the truth, Luke. If my rebels come here, they destroy Smith's World and themselves." He chuckled. "It was one of my best ideas, Luke. Don't you agree?"

I wheeled towards the window. The fire was angrier in the night sky, and my ears picked out the sound of voices below.

"We'll have to get out of here," I said. "Evelyn—"

She was looking at Smith, but she said to me: "There's a copter on the roof—"

"Then let's go—"

I grabbed her arm, but she jerked away from me. Her eyes were still fixed on Smith, and the God of Smith's World was going to his knees.

This time, his words were audible.

"'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Why art Thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O, my God, I cry in

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the daytime but Thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent . . .'"

"Smith!" Evelyn shrieked.

"Look at his eyes," I said. "He can't hear you now—"

"We must go, Evelyn—"

"I can't! I can't leave him."

"You'll have to leave him. If the mob reaches the citadel—"

"But he *needs* me, Luke!"

Now I heard the shouts clearly in the street far below. I tried again to make Evelyn come with me, but her arms were steel-strong around the stooped body of Smith.

I left her, and went to the roof.

There were people running everywhere in the streets when I brought the copter to ground. Some tried to climb aboard, shouting:

"To the spaceport! Please take me! The spaceships are leaving! I want to go home!"

The spaceships! The words struck me with their message of hope. If I could find Alita and reach the Smith-rockets before the mobs attacked . . .

Then I realized how hopeless it was. Alita was a prisoner in some unknown quarter of Smith's World, and only minutes were delaying the eruption of Smith's planet into atomic dust.

My mind rocked with the decision I had to make. To leave Alita behind, and take my chance of getting to safety—or to search the unknown streets and terrain until the moment when the pile was triggered, and all problems ended.

It was then I realized that my love for Alita was no manufactured thing. I loved her for what she was, and I knew that I would never see her again.

I guided the copter back into the sky, and followed the running crowds to the spaceport of Smith's World, and heard the rockets already beginning to explode, promising return to the planet of our birth and our true God.

These are my Smith-facts.

As you know by now, some sixty Smith-rockets left the planet before the atomic explosion that turned Smith's World into a black cinder. And you know that Alita was a passenger aboard one of those ships, one of three-hundred women prisoners released by the rebels. Even now, I cannot speak of our reunion on Earth without clouded eyes.

We have a son, Alita and I.

He believes in God. We do, too.

THE END

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REQUIRED COURSE

By RON GOULART

In the old days it was simple—boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. But we live in an age of science now. So it goes like this—boy meets girl, boy loves girl, boy meets robot. . . .

THE grass on the slope leading down to Leisurewood Village was still damp and the air still had a touch of early morning chill in it. Whistling, Dave McMinn slid his hands into his trouser pockets and cut down toward the high wire fence around the abandoned housing development. He'd made it from the little railway station in under an hour, seeing the sky go from blurred gray to thin blue. He grinned and his exhaled breath was faintly white. It was getting chilly.

Lynn had told him about the Negro robot and the gate. Dave didn't particularly like the idea. This morning, though, he hadn't seen Lynn for nearly a month, not since the end of the semester. He didn't intend to let things bother him.

Stopping in the soft dust beyond the gate Dave called out, "Good morning in there."

Sure enough a robot, in what looked like a Martian dockworker's outfit, shuffled out of the buff gatekeeper's shack. "Mornin' to you, marse," he drawled, slapping his knees.

Dave winced. "Morning. I'm Dave McMinn. I'm here to visit Miss Marker and her father."

The gatekeeper chuckled and flapped his arms. "Well, I'm fetched if you ain't, marse. Just a second an' I lets you in." He stepped back into the shack.

Watching the fine dust his white bucks scattered Dave moved forward as the gate swung in. "Just where is the main house?" Dave called into the shack. He waited for an answer and glanced up the clean, tree-lined main street of Leisurewood.

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A door slammed quietly behind him. Dave turned and saw a chubby robot moving toward him from the nearest white cottage. The machine's hand clicked out and it smiled. "Buzz is the name. Welcome aboard. Like the lay of the land?"

The robot had a fairly convincing handshake. "I'm here to see Lynn and her dad," Dave said. "Going to spend today and tomorrow."

Smiling, the robot handed Dave a white card and a glittering pin. "Tag yourself, so folks'll know you."

The card had Dave's name printed on it, all caps. He fixed it to his lapel. On the lapel of the robot's blue suit he noticed a tag reading: Buzz, Experimental CC-PR.

"Like Leisurewood?" Buzz asked, grinning at Dave's name tag. "Great place. Air's wonderful." He seemed to inhale deeply. "Notice it?"

"Yeah, I've been breathing it ever since I got here." Dave chuckled at his own sarcasm.

Buzz laughed. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh." He took Dave's arm and led him to the sidewalk. "Leisurewood was abandoned, you know, nearly forty years ago. When the factories in the valley became obsolete. It wasn't until Mr. Marker set up his independent labs here that Leisurewood flowered again."

Dave noticed all the green lawns. "You keep it up pretty well." It still bothered him a little to make small talk with a machine.

"Uh-huh. Right you are, Dave." Buzz led him along the block. "Bet you're anxious to see Lynn, huh?"

"Sort of."

Buzz winked. "Nice kid. Pretty as a bug's rear, you know." He nudged Dave. "You getting any there, boy?"

Dave stopped and pulled away from the robot. "Look, I'm amazed at you as a technical achievement. But now can I see Lynn and her dad? Just point me at their place and we'll say good-bye. Okay?"

Buzz clapped his hands together. "Sure enough, Dave. In a jiffy, guy. Sure now. But first you want to pretty up a little."

"No. I'll do that when I get to the main house."

"Come on," Buzz said, guiding Dave around the first corner. "See, fellow, this is my job like. I get you a good breakfast and a shave and a haircut and so on and when you pop in on the sweetheart and her dad, well, you're shipshape. See?"

Dave decided the robot couldn't lead him anywhere Lynn and her father didn't want him to go. "Okay, Buzz. Fine." He went with the robot up the orange steps of a bungalow. Through the picture window he saw a motherly robot dusting expectantly.

"Best food in town," Buzz said, reaching for the door chime switch. "Home cooking."

"That's for me," Dave said,

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taking his arm out of Buzz's grip.

A husky robot in a sweat suit got Dave as he was stepping out of the barbershop.

Dave told this one, Charlie, Experimental PE-2, that he was anxious to get to the main house. Charlie grinned at that and said what Dave needed was a good massage to unknot all those muscles that traveling in an old-fashioned rail car tied up. Dave went to the big gray gym with him.

It was nearing mid-day when Dave hurried down the cool, shadowy stairs of the gym. He shivered as he stepped into the warm day. The air was getting hazy and Dave had to squint as he looked around him and tried to figure where the main house was.

"Hey there, Dave."

Turning, Dave saw two robots in dark suits moving along the street toward him. "Hi," he said. "Can you tell me how to get to the main house?" He assumed either Lynn or her father had finally sent someone down to escort him there.

"Plenty of time for that," said the one labeled Hank, Experimental BG-PC 3. He took one of Dave's arms and Wally, Experimental BG-PC 4 took the other.

"Aren't they expecting me for lunch or something?" Dave said. He noticed that he was perspiring quite a lot. Probably a reaction to the workout.

Wally grunted good-naturedly. "We got a snack set up for you over at the Rec Center."

"Oh?"

"Pretty nice place Mr. Marker's got set up here," Hank said as they turned down an alley.

"Must be the dream of every scientist to have a place like this to work in," Dave said.

"Nice," Wally said.

They led Dave through the self-opening back door of a red real-brick building. Down a narrow brown corridor and into a high green room circled with folding chairs.

Three robots in light suits were standing together in the center of the room. There were no rugs on the floor.

Hank and Wally saluted Dave a good-bye and left.

"How far from the main house am I?" Dave said, walking up to the three remaining robots. "I can skip the snack."

These robots had no tags. The tallest one handed Dave a plastic cup. "Ice coffee. Drink it. Do you good."

The other two helped Dave sit down in a straight chair. Some of the coffee spilled. It was cold all right.

"We have a few little tests we'd like you to take, Mr. McMinn."

Dave looked up at the talking one. "Mr. Marker used to make robots for the Motivational Research people on Mars, right? You're some of those? Leftovers?"

"First we have this multiple

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choice thing. A snap. Same as you must take at North Crispin College, Mr. McMinn."

The other two robots slid a table in front of Dave and gave him a test writer.

"Works the same as an exam. Just push the buttons. The first one deals with basic troubles." He handed Dave a sheet of thick yellow paper dotted with small punch holes.

The first question on this practice test was: I think somebody is out to get me. True. False.

Dave thought for a moment and pushed the false button.

Apparently someone at the Rec Center had hypnotized him. When Dave got out it was mid-afternoon and he kept getting fleeting impressions of his fifth birthday party. He crossed the street and leaned against a tree, his weight shaking down a few half-dry leaves.

To his right the development inclined gradually into hills and he saw now a large gabled house, not built in the Leisurewood pattern, with a sprawling green house next to it. From what Dave remembered of talks with Lynn that was the main house. Where she spent her vacation periods. Marker's place.

Dave grinned without being amused and started toward the house. He covered two peaceful blocks before he sensed another robot.

This one was big and had a lot of synthetic blond hair. His name was John, Experimental X. He caught Dave's arm and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Dave jerked away, stumbled over the curb. His teeth clicked together as he landed on one foot. He stepped further off and looked at John. "I'm on my way up to the main house now, friend. Don't need any help."

"Ah," said John, smiling understandingly. "Ah, but we all need help, son." He held out a hand, smooth palm upward. "Come with me, Dave."

"Go away." Dave started walking, angling toward the middle of the street. He could feel twilight coming.

"We have a message for you."

Dave stopped. "What?"

"A message for everyone. Come with me to the town council and we will talk to you." John was in the street, gliding fast at Dave. "You'll like the council. In days to come it will serve as a model. And as a monument to Mr. Marker."

The robot was close to him and Dave could hear the eyelids click as they briefly lowered. "I guess I'll come."

"Oh, you won't regret it."

Someone straightened Dave's bowtie. Dave opened his eyes, realizing he hadn't been wearing a bowtie. A smiling robot in butler attire gave the tie a final tug and stepped back. Over the butler's rounded shoulders Dave saw evening out a high clear window. Below, a few yellow lights were scattered in the darkness.

"Cocktails in the library," said

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the butler, drifting over the thick patterned rug to the room's door.

It was a bedroom and as Dave walked to the door he noticed himself in a full-length mirror. He was wearing evening clothes, including a lapel flower. No tag now.

Down a half-turning staircase and across a smooth yellow hall and Dave was in a library with Lynn, her father and a real fireplace. The butler, who had preceeded him, turned with a martini on an ebony tray. Dave took the drink and the butler left.

George R. Marker held out his hand. "Glad to have you as a guest, Dave. Lynn recommends you highly." He was a large, smiling man with straight dark hair.

Dave nodded. "Thank you, sir." He watched Lynn, smiling carefully.

Lynn, her auburn hair down, wearing a blue cocktail dress, smiled up at him. She was perched on the arm of a big real-leather chair, her glass cupped in one slender hand. "Hi," she said.

She was nineteen and had gray eyes that tended to sparkle. Dave managed an authentic smile. "Hi. I finally made it."

Mr. Marker was studying a narrow cigar in the light that flared out from the deep fireplace. "You did very well today, Dave. We'll talk about it after dinner a bit more." He lit the cigar and nodded his head slowly for nearly a half minute. Then he coughed. "I'll be in my den until dinner, Lynn. Paperwork, Dave. See you shortly. Why not stroll a little, Lynn, prior to the meal." He shook Dave's hand again and left by a door Dave had just noticed.

Lynn stood first, then came up to Dave. "He likes you, Dave. That's very encouraging."

Dave put his hands on her waist so that his thumbs met. "Your dad's very handy with tools." He let go. "Let's stroll then."

Outside, Lynn with a thin shawl over her bare shoulders, they walked down a lane overhung with drooping trees. A block from the house Dave stopped and took Lynn's arm. "Now what in the name of heaven has been going on?"

Lynn inhaled quickly. "Oh, you came through very well. At the Center you were just fine. I was worried about the council, but, well, you came through great there, too."

"Sure. With flying colors. You know about all this. It's not some whim of your dad's? Or some mechanical breakdown." He led her over a stretch of dark pavement to a low green bench.

"You're angry?" Lynn touched her upper lip with her tongue, her eyes wide.

Dave swallowed. "Look, Lynn, I mean, I spent all afternoon with a bunch of machines that kept asking me about my moral outlook. I don't mind the massage and the shave. The ham and eggs were fine. But, damn, the

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way those guys looked at me." He sat down and dropped his folded hands between his legs.

Lynn sat beside him. "They're really good aren't they. See, that's why dad is freelancing now. He felt too limited in Motivational Research. They never let him build in the right questions. But these fellows he's turning out now, they really find things out." She flicked her foot and her shoe arced up and fell into the grass near them. "And this is just a start."

Dave watched the shoe land. "Lynn?"

"Umm?"

"We've known each other nearly two semesters. You wear my fraternity pin. Everybody at North Crispin knows we go steady." He put a hand on her shoulder. "In other words, we're fond of each other."

She touched his resting fingers. "Well, of course."

"Well, then, Lynn, why in the hell did you let me go through all that foolishness?"

"You're being poor Dave now. Is that it?"

"You have a grudge maybe. Is that why?"

Lynn shrugged. "If you're going to indulge in self-pity we won't bother having an adult discussion."

Dave stood. "You are a sophomore, Lynn. And the kind of discussion you can have is called sophomoric." He jammed his hands in his pockets and started downhill.

Lynn, after she found her shoe, came after him. "I thought you realized, Dave, that I help dad in his work. That what he does is important. We want these machines to be perfect. We want acceptance for dad's robots because then people will be helped." She caught Dave's arm. "I thought you'd be willing to help us. See, we don't often get somebody to . . . to try out all the machines."

"That's fine." He cut across a neat lawn and sat on a porch.

"And if you're going, eventually, to marry me, my lord, we have to know about you." She stood on a stepping stone, her hands behind her and looked up at him.

"Don't you know?"

Lynn sighed. "But we have all these fellows to test you. Why let them go to waste?"

"Why didn't you mention it? I wrote you from the resort and asked if I could visit you on my next days off. And you said yes."

"Do you like your job, by the way?"

"It's great. Well?"

"It doesn't make for a good test situation. You build up animosities in advance."

Dave looked at her and shook his head. "I thought I knew you."

"Well, you do. We love each other." She came up the steps. "And, Dave, you did fine on all the tests. You're acceptable as anything."

"I don't see how you could just throw me to those machines."

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Lynn rumpled his crew cut. "There you go. Feeling sorry for yourself."

"I don't know," Dave said. "All those guys—machines, I mean. And blacking out. I shouldn't have."

"But you passed. Everything's okay." She stretched up and kissed him on the cheek. "We'll go over all the data on you tomorrow. And tomorrow, too, I'll show you the file on me, from when I took the tests. Then we'll really know all about each other." Lynn lowered her head.

Dave watched her for a moment and then took her hand. "Tomorrow?"

Lynn nodded.

"Well," Dave said. "We better be getting up to the main house. Must be dinner time." He touched at her shoulder and then led her across the dark lawn and up the dark street.

Dave left the house several hours before dawn, going the way he had gone when he went on the stroll. That was the only way he knew of getting out of the place.

The village was cold and clear in the moonlight as he ran quietly downhill in his soft-soled white bucks. All was silence.

No lights in any of the cottages and no sign of robots.

Dave stopped a moment in a low gutter and took several deep breaths. He cut over among the cottages so he would hit the fence away from the gatekeeper's shack.

As far as he knew the fence wasn't electrified. He found a section flanked by high neat hedge and climbed over. He was in mid-air outside when the single bell began clanging in the shack.

Dave rose from his knees and started running again. Toward the hills.

He heard the gatekeeper call out, "Who dere? Who dat?"

Dave wanted to stop and shout something back, but he kept running. And pretty soon he couldn't hear the calling any more.

He had to sit three hours in the little rail station before he could get a train back to the resort and his vacation job.

Long before the train came Dave knew he wouldn't see Lynn the next semester. Wouldn't take any of the same courses anymore.

He even considered transferring to another planet.

THE END

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Sight returns . . . and a wind from the hill presses a few green blades before his eyes. He moves his cheek slightly, and the grass feels good beneath his face.

Without moving, Ben glanced at the hill, getting his bearings. He was in a shallow green depression, just below the steep approach. Out of the forest, then—but not in sight of the people. Good. Best to just rest where he was and not try to see them yet. Not for awhile. When he told them—when he had to try to explain it without understanding it himself—the telling itself would be bad enough.

They'd know. They'd smell it on him and see it in his eyes, and the way he was now—no, best to wait.

The terrified colonists did not know the rules, nor the Player. They saw the Penalties come screaming back, dead or dying. And remorselessly the being in the alien wood commanded them to keep on playing . . .

the GAME

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By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

Illustrated by ADKINS

Finally, he raised himself on one arm and gazed over the rolling grassland to the east. His farmer's eye probed beneath the green cover and into the texture of the soil itself. Rich, incredibly fertile soil, he knew. There had been no time yet for tests, but he had held the dark, moist grains in his hand, and he knew.

It was the first thing they did after the ship left them, the last sound of its thunder lost in the sky. He looked at the others, and they all held little mounds of the alien soil, and their thoughts were the same as his own. Here was the reason they had come—here was ground that had never felt the cleave of iron or the fall of a seed from a human hand.

That had been—when? Two days ago? It seemed, to Ben, a pitifully short history of a colony. The dream was over—and who would be present to record the nightmare to come?

THEY were waiting for him at the top of the hill; fifty men and women in overalls and colored shirts and bright print dresses—new things that had not had time to gain the washed and faded status of workclothes. They were farmers, like himself, and they stood in close, somber groups of five or six, their women in shadow-clusters a few steps behind.

Esther stood a little apart from

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the others—not too far—just enough to define herself as Leader's wife. He glanced at her quickly, without smiling, and she nodded and followed him with her eyes.

He moved in among them, and when he stopped they formed a rough half-circle around him. They waited, watching, but saying nothing.

A tall man stepped forward. His lean face was dark and windrawn. He nodded, and shifted his weight from one long leg to the other.

"Ben . . . " he said.

Ben nodded. "Hello, Roy."

Roy squinted at him. "You all right, Ben?"

"Yes. I'm fine. A little tired is all."

"Don't *look* too good," said Roy. He raised one shaggy brow and glanced at the circle for confirmation. The men nodded in silent agreement.

"I'm fine," Ben smiled. "I said I was all right, didn't I?" He knows, thought Ben. Roy knows. I can't lie to him any more than I could to Esther.

Roy studied him a long moment, then laid a strong hand on his arm.

"It wasn't no joke, was it Ben? There's something really out there?"

Ben knew it wasn't a question. He looked at Roy, then at the ground. And suddenly he knew he couldn't tell them. After all the times he had gone over it in his mind and worked out how he was going to do it, now he knew it was all wrong. He knew if he opened his mouth the words wouldn't come out the way he wanted at all.

"Yes, Roy—something. I—— don't know just what."

He looked at the men, his eyes resting for a moment on each face.

"We've got some trouble," he said simply. "It's not going to be good."

They nodded at him and he knew they were trying to say yes, they understood; they had been expecting bad news, and he wanted to scream at them and tell them no! no! You weren't expecting *this!* You *don't* understand, you *don't!*

He could feel the cold beads of sweat forming on his face, and he felt a terrible need to look at Esther but she was lost somewhere in the sea of faces.

Esther! Esther! How little time!

"Listen," he said, trying to choose his words and not say the wrong thing. "I think we better have a meeting in a half hour. I'll tell you all I can then."

He caught the slight frowns, the light scatter of mumbled objections and disappointment, but no one seemed to care to make an issue of it.

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"Thanks," he said, "I'm a little tired, and I'd like to gather my words. I—can't talk normal, I guess, without a Mule up front to listen."

A few of the men laughed softly, and the women turned to each other and nodded.

"All right," said Roy, and the way he said it Ben knew that some of the fear had come across. "Later, Ben, when you're ready."

"Not later—now!"

Ben turned, and he knew right where to look. The man edging through the crowd was solid, built low to the ground, as if his frame were married to the earth like a tree. A thatch of sun-bleached hair covered eyes frozen in perpetual challenge.

Ben resigned himself to trouble, knowing little else could come from an encounter with Ork Miller.

"All right, Ork, what is it?" But he knew what it was—whatever Ork might say, the thing behind it was Esther. Ork stopped a few feet from Ben.

"Been here all day, Ben," he said lazily, "same as everyone else. Whatever it is, right now's a good time."

Roy Tate moved. "Miller—"

"No, Roy," Ben said, keeping his eyes on Ork.

Ork grinned. "Right Ben. Let's get on with it." He winked in Esther's direction. "Won't keep you—know you're in a—hurry."

Ben hit him. He felt bone and cartilage collapse a second before pain shot back through his own arm and shoulder.

Ben studied the faces around him, reading neither approval nor censure. "Whatever you're thinking," he said, "think it." He turned and walked away, feeling Esther's presence behind him.

FOR a long time she said nothing, then she spoke very softly.

"Is it bad, Ben? Is it going to be really bad?"

His eyes were closed and his head rested on the coolness of her legs. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She smiled, and he reached up and touched her gently. She blushed slightly and turned her head so he could just catch the corner of a smile.

He laughed softly. "Damned if I didn't get one of those modest country girls you read about in the magazines!" He said it with an exaggerated midwestern twang that usually made her laugh.

She looked back at him, but the beginning of a smile died on her lips. Ben stood up and moved to his own cot. He sat for a long moment staring at the translucent walls of the shelter.

"All right," he said finally, "yes. It's bad. It's about as bad as it can get, I think, and I—can't even explain what it is."

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He faced her. "I was there, Esther—where it happened. And it talked to me and told me things, and it—didn't even seem bad, then, because it wasn't real and it wasn't me . . . it couldn't have been me, could it?"

For a moment he said nothing. It was hard to make the words come at all, and he wondered whether it was his own protective barrier against fear—or something they had put there.

"Ben—"

"No, wait Esther. Listen, I was about five, and I remember my grandmother—she was very old. She used to tell the same story over and over, and the grownups always listened to her—and the kids weren't supposed to. But we heard, of course. She must have been about the same age we were when it happened, and we liked stories like that. She told about how everyone got the bomb, finally, and people knew the missiles might come, by the thousands, any minute. The newspapers and TV said no one on earth would live through it. And the grownups always asked the same question: Well, what did you do, what did you *do*? And she'd smile and say, why, nothing. We didn't do anything. Some people thought about a shelter, but mostly we just went about our business."

Ben moved to her and grabbed her shoulders hard. "Don't you see? No matter how often she told it—*no one believed her!* No one understood how you can take just so much horror and then you can't even be scared anymore! It's happened to me, Esther—I *know* what's going to happen, but I can't—"

Then she was there, her face hard against his shoulder.

"Oh, Ben, Ben—Ben!"

She raised her face to meet him and he caught a flash of wide eyes and soft tears and the shock ground in at the base of his spine and ripped a jagged blade through his head. He jerked up and his back looped itself into a jarring arc, turning him around and crushing him against the side of the shelter. The room swam, he opened his mouth and words came spewing out like shapeless frogs.

"Esssssssstoooor!"

She shrank from him, her face a frozen mask. He staggered toward her, the spasms coming in waves of pain, jerking his mucles like snakes across his body. A bone snapped in his wrist and he dropped like a stone to the floor.

She was saying something, but he couldn't understand what it was. She trembled against him and he was aware of hot tears against the brittle cold of his shoulder. The need he felt for her, the wave of undiluted hunger, was almost overpowering. If he could take what she could give

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him, purge away the stain the gray finger had left when it touched his mind in that one small second: . . .

Instead, he raised himself on shaky arms and retched violently. She caught him before he dropped back into his own sickness.

THE challenge came like an unfamiliar odor climbing out of the forest and up the hill. They all felt it, and stopped whatever they were doing to listen. They knew—instinctively: *alien . . . ALIEN!*

Some Colony conditioning course should have softened the blow, but then—there weren't supposed to be any aliens on Newhio, and there were plenty of other things to learn about surviving on a new planet. So, for Ben, all the barriers of fear were left standing. He walked down the hill and stepped into the forest armed only with the shock of unbelief.

Terror hit him like a physical blow at the first recognizable pillar of stone. The dark, strangely-faceted column seemed completely natural among the flower-crested trees and dank ferns.

It was not a *copy* of nature—he knew that. Somehow, a copy wouldn't have been so bad. It was an abstraction, a symbol—a quick, deftly rendered and highly refined sketch; it was the breath and life of the forest and the touch of the thing that had made it. It was art—a terrible alien art he shrank from with every earth-born atom of his body.

He came very close to turning back. He remembered the others waiting on the hill above the forest. He remembered Esther, straight and proud, smiling all the way into the shadows of the first grove of trees; smiling against her fear and his, and forgetting he always read everything in her eyes.

He passed under delicate archways and over narrow pathways cut from the underlying stone. He was afraid, and he knew his fear was being softly cushioned by some powerful empathy, something that chose to protect him for the moment from itself.

Then—the guiding hand was against his naked mind.

No aliens. . . . no aliens. . . . no aliens . . . no!

He stood in the dark circle of stone, thick forest cover veiling all but a touch of the day.

Harker. . . .

Again, the shield—

Listen, Player Ben Harker . . . Listen to the Rules of the Game. . . .

He opened his eyes, and she was watching him. He felt the sickness in his mouth, and she brought him something hot. The searing liquid was pleasant, fa-

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miliar pain, and brought him fully awake.

"Is it all right, now?"

"Yes. I think so. I—"

"What, Ben?"

"Nothing . . ." He moved, and the pain in his wrist made him remember. She touched his arm lightly, but with a slight hesitancy he knew she instantly regreted.

"I wrapped it as well as I could. I think it broke when—"

"Convulsion. That's the word, Esther."

"Ben, don't! You don't have to be that way with me. Not with me."

She touched his shoulder lightly. He jerked away.

"No, damn it, don't—you—*see!* That—is—*over!*"

She shook her head, staring at him. "I did that, Ben? I did that to you? No, Ben!"

"Oh, yes," he said, "oh, yes, Ben." The cold detachment of his own voice startled him. He didn't want it that way, but he could feel nothing else. Not now. Not unless he wanted to go to her and hold her and let that thing out there wrench his leg out of joint or maybe break his spine in half.

He looked at her once more, for a long moment, wanting this look to last. Then he turned and left.

THEY didn't believe him. He knew they wouldn't. They stared, cautiously, fearfully, wondering why he should want to tell them such things.

Thad Baxter stood up and glared. "I don't understand, Ben, but I know this. Whatever your filthy idea is, *my* wife isn't going to have—"

"Shut up, Thad, and listen!" He paused, searched their faces, and tried to calculate the instant they would turn their fear and anger on him.

"All right," he said. "All right." It had to be this way, he knew, because it was the only thing they'd understand.

"Kiss your wife, Thad."

Thad frowned. "Whaaat? Listen here—"

"We should have listened to Ork, maybe," someone mumbled.

"Go on," Ben said tightly, "kiss her! Damn it, just kiss her!"

Roy Tate studied Ben curiously. He turned to Thad.

"All right, go on," he said quietly. "Can't hurt anything, Thad."

Thad glared, but leaned over cautiously and touched his lips lightly against his wife's cheek. The girl smiled, and a few people laughed nervously.

Thad faced Ben with a cold eye. "You get some dirty kick out of that? Is that it?" He pulled his wife to him. "See? You get it now? Leader gets *all* the women and—*thuuuuuuuurc!*

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Thad doubled and dropped in a writhing heap. The girl screamed a high note Ben thought would hang in the air forever. She paled and Roy caught her as she fell. Two men quickly thrust a scrap of wood in Thad's jaws.

"All right," yelled Ben, "now sit down!"

Fifty pair of eyes stared at him, and there was nothing he could see but fear.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "It happened to me, but you didn't see it—I guess you have to see it. I don't understand it, and I don't expect you to. But the women come under the rules of the Game —and—they don't belong to us—anymore. Not until we're *told* they do. . . ."

He was expecting it and he was ready when they rose and surged toward him. He pulled the pistol from his pocket and fired once over their heads. They paused.

"Drop that, Ben! Drop it!"

He held the gun at arm's length, trying to cover them all at once. "Stay away from the women!" he yelled. "Don't touch them! Don't go near them! After this meeting the women will stay here while the men move their things to the shelters on the left slope of the hill, then—"

Thad Baxter groaned and turned over. His wife was still stretched out limply beside him. Remembering Thad seemed to set them off again. A few men moved closer.

Ben turned on them. "My God, don't you understand! You think *I* did that? Do you? *Do you!*"

The rock hit him just above the right eye and he dropped as the blackness rolled over him.

* * *

Roy's face swam in a field of blinding red light. Something was wrong. One eye wouldn't open and the other couldn't seem to hold anything in proper focus.

"You all right?"

A surge of faraway noise reached his ears and he sat up suddenly. The light flashed again and doubled him up on the ground.

"Roy," he moaned, "what happened?"

"Ork Miller beaned you one, that's what!" snapped Roy. "And you nearly got more than that. I guess you can thank Jack Tinner for being alive. He saw what happened to Thad and knew dang well you didn't do it—so he turned 'em all on that—thing out there, 'stead of you. They—"

"What? WHAT!" Ben jerked up, ignoring the pain. The buzzing in his ears suddenly made sense. He broke away from Roy and ran to the door of the shelter. His stomach was a hard knot. They were in the center of the clearing, an angry mob of men and women. He had known them all for months, but there

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was no trace of recognition on their faces now.

Some of the men were tearing open crates and boxes and passing out pitchforks, axes—anything that seemed to fit the curve of their hands. A few of them had found the precious rifles and ammunition.

"No! Oh, *no!*" He strained against Roy's grip and the tall man slammed him against the shelter.

"Now look, damn it," warned Roy, "you can't do nothin' about this, Ben!" He held Ben firmly against the shelter, and Ben stared numbly at the clearing.

Ork Miller found the guns first. Sweat gleamed across his broad face and his stubby fingers whitened around the stock of the rifle. He opened his mouth and laughed to the sky, then ran across the camp in the direction of the forest.

It was too fast. No one saw it, and it was a long moment before anyone even knew something was wrong. One minute Ork was running from them, down the slope of the hill—then, without stopping, or turning—or anything, he was coming back again. Only coming back it wasn't really Ork any more.

Momentum carried him ten yards back into the clearing. The way he was, he couldn't have come that far on his own. Then he turned crazily and stumbled, and began to crawl, only it looked a whole lot worse than crawling.

Thad Baxter took a rifle from someone and shot Ork through his "head" twenty-eight times then kept holding the trigger back until he realized the ammunion was gone.

THE men moved their things to the shelters Ben had chosen, and no one else tried to lead an attack into the forest. In the morning, after a night when no one slept at all—or tried to—the names of all the wives went into a box in the center of the clearing. Betty Fenner's name was drawn first, and Jack Fenner screamed beneath the four men who were holding him down.

"I don't like this, Ben," said Roy tightly.

It seemed a foolish thing to say. Ben turned away wearily.

"No one *likes* it, Roy . . ."

Roy grabbed his arm and turned him around. "Is it any worse if we just take our chances? If *my* wife is going to die, I don't want her to do it down there!"

Ben looked straight ahead. "We don't know that they die. We don't know that."

Roy laughed. "Well, hell, Ben, maybe you're right—maybe they just kinda get turned inside out, like old Ork, maybe?"

Ben shut his eyes. "Shut up, Roy. Just shut up—now."

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"Oh, sure," said Roy, "I can do that."

"Besides," Ben recited, "Ork was a man." He tried to bring some kind of feeling to his words, but something was all hollow inside, and empty, and he couldn't make it right again.

"He was a man, and men aren't allowed in the 'Game Area.' We don't know what happens to the women."

Roy just looked at him. "Okay said Ben. "We have an idea what to expect—we don't *know*."

Jack Fenner was staring at him from across the clearing. Ben looked away. Fenner was up now, but they still held him. He watched his wife a few yards away. Just watched her, and did not try to say anything at all.

"You got any other ideas?" said Ben. "We *don't* play the Game, I have a pretty good idea what happens. We gain some time to think, Roy—work something out. Maybe we can get a Beacon going."

Roy spat. "Beacon, hell. A bunch of farmers can't build a Beacon and you know it."

Ben spoke more to himself than to Roy. "It's one woman at a time—not twenty-five. We agreed there was nothing else—all of us, Roy."

"I'd rather get it over with," Roy said darkly, "—now."

Ben looked at him. Roy Tate was a gentle man. But there was no sign of the gentleness there now.

"Kill Trudy," said Ben simply.

"Yes," Roy answered. "Kill her."

Ben shook his head slowly. "You know she can't die, Roy. They haven't even left us that."

BETTY FENNER walked down the hill toward the forest. It was a beautiful day, and Ben and the others watched her until the pale blue dress blended with the shadows of the trees and the yellow hair no longer reflected the bright alien sun. There was nothing else to do. They all stood for a moment on the brink of the hill before sorrow and anger gave way to helplessness and shame. Then they drifted off to do something, or pretend to, and no two men walked away together.

Only the women huddled in small groups, going about whatever tasks were necessary. Everyone still had to eat, so there would be strength enough to maybe die tomorrow.

Ben saw Esther, standing across the strip that now separated the men from their wives.

"Is—your head any better, Ben?"

"Yes. It's fine now."

"Oh, well, good . . . you have everything you need? You don't need anything I can bring you? I could leave it here, and—"

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"No. I don't think so, Esther. Thanks."

"Oh, well . . ."

Their eyes met for a long moment, then she turned and disappeared behind her shelter.

* * *

The "critique" arrived in the last hours of evening. It was a shimmering azure curtain, and it hung in the air a few feet above the ground. It seemed to enlarge and contract slightly around the edges, with a steady, pulsating beat.

Ben had no idea how long it might stay there, and one of the women was permitted across the line long enough to copy it in shorthand. Long before she finished, the last bit of hope Ben had carefully nourished, faded away. It was obvious enough, now—they were field mice playing chess with a Russian Master. It was a position nothing short of insanity.

The critique read:

PLAYER BEN HARKER—
Commitment (entering) (creation) of (Pawn) (equipment) equated 34.7**-**5-(L)-(?)-in-(Game-Entrance). L Quad/C terminated.

. . . .

Rate: 4. . . . . .G
Penalty: (Drone-prior-time/relation-start) ((***)) (T)
Adjusted (?) Vector—J (RR/RR/ . . .

Hern Veckal shook his head and turned from the fire. "It doesn't make sense—not a damn *bit* of sense!

"You think it would, Hern?" Thad Baxter smiled grimly. Thad had come off a little easier, Ben noted. He favored one arm slightly, but no bones broken.

"You really expected," Thad said, "to make something out of that—that—"

"All right, take it easy," said Ben. "One way, Thad, that—scoreboard—showing up like that—it's a good thing."

The five men watched him expectantly.

"It's not good for a man to be at a dead end, but it's a lot better to *know* it, if he is, so he doesn't keep butting his head against the same wall."

"You mean," asked Marc Stenger, the youngest one there, "that you figure there's nothing to do—we just sit here, and—"

Ben raised a hand. "Now hold it. I didn't say that. I just said we can mark off one approach as closed—and face it and quit worrying about it. Before," he explained, "we couldn't be certain there wasn't some way to figure out just what we were up against. I mean, I hadn't given up the idea that whatever it is out there had to have *something* in common with us—something we could use against it. I know better now."

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"And that," Roy said flatly, "is a good deal for us, huh?"

Ben nodded vehemently. "All right, Roy, yes! Damn right it is! Look. I heard all the talk—this afternoon, when the message came through. Every man in camp had some idea of—of translating the thing, figuring out what it meant. That, is a waste of time, and we all know it! Sure, we made *some* sense out of it. Betty Fenner's the Pawn—and Ork is, was, the Drone that tried to leave the area before the Game began. What else? A score, maybe—but so what? Part of it could be math of some kind, but we have people here that have had some pretty heady stuff—and *no* one says there's anything there that remotely relates to anything we know."

"There's no way," said Jack Tinner, "no way at all to deal with it—or even understand why it's doing this to us . . ."

Ben nodded. "When I was out there," he said quietly, "talking to the thing—it's like you say something and it just talks right over you—not as if it didn't *care* what you said—it just doesn't *recognize* you're there enough to listen! I don't even think it's capable of the idea that something could communicate back to it."

Roy shifted in front of the fire. "Which leaves us just where, Ben?"

"Just about zero," said Ben grimly, "unless we can get our minds to working and figure our way out *on our own*—without even considering the thing we're fighting."

"That's not easy," Roy suggested, "winning the war while ignoring the enemy."

Ben caught Roy's eye and held it a moment. He remembered Roy's acid comments of the afternoon, and didn't want them repeated now.

"There's the Beacon," he said, "there's a pretty fair possibility there." Roy shrugged almost imperceptively, but managed to keep quiet.

Ben turned to Jim Hubbard. He was nearly invisible at the edge of the gathering, and he had been there, without speaking, throughout the conversation. Jim looked up warily, and Ben wished to hell he could at least keep the hangdog look of doom to himself long enough to inject a little hope into the group.

"Well," Hubbard began reluctantly, "like I told Ben, I can't promise anything. I had some Agricultural Electronics, but that isn't too close to Beacon technology. Hell, not close at all!"

Ben took a deep breath before he spoke. "Sure, Jim, we understand—and we don't expect you to do any more than you can. But just tell them what you told me—about the *possibility* of getting something going."

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Jim displayed a sick grin. "Well, okay—only, I don't know . . . I've been through the stuff we've got—all of it. There's just *about* everything we need to *make* a Beacon, that is, to make something that can do what a Beacon does. But about the equipment to put it all together, or—" he shrugged, "whether I've got the know-how to do it. . . ."

Ben touched the boy's arm. "You know how important it is, Jim. Just give it all you can." Jim grinned, a wide, gap-toothed attempt at enthusiasm. Ben could have hit him in the teeth.

Marc Stenger gave a low moan and jumped to his feet. He ran a bony hand over his face and stared at them like a man addressing a conclave of idiots.

"That's it, then?" he whispered. "That's what we're counting on—this—this—tractor mechanic is going to build a Beacon out of—of—cultivator batteries and Plowmechs? Him? *Him?*"

Ben raised up and pulled the boy down hard to the ground.

"Now you just take it easy, son," he said quietly, "—and just what the hell might you have to suggest? Eh? What!"

Marc stared at him a moment, then shook him off and walked out of the fire light toward his shelter.

"It's not like that at all," Ben explained. "We *do* have the parts and Jim's a damn-sight more qualified than anyone else around here. I want you to give him—all the support you can." He let his gaze touch on each one of them in turn.

"I don't want my wife to go either," he said. "We've got to try something."

"It's not that the Beacon is so *complicated*," Jim blurted out loudly, "it's just a matter of—ah, boosting a signal up high enough to get a message *into* non-space, and, ah—ha! ha!—if you'll all give me your support—"

"You shut him up, Ben," Jack Tinner said darkly, "or I'm a-gonna kill him right here . . ."

BEN wished it could have been almost anyone else, but it wasn't. Elaine Stenger, seventeen, was a slight, willowy young girl just tomorrow away from becoming a woman. When Ben drew her name Marc didn't even look up. Elaine made a low noise in her throat and fell into a small and pitiful heap. The women had to make her leave the hill and none of the men could watch that.

When she was halfway down the slope, she seemed to realize what was really happening to her. She turned and looked at them with wide, frightened eyes. Then she screamed. She screamed until Ben thought his guts would eat their way out and shrivel in the sun. Then, suddenly, she turned and ran down the hill as

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fast as she could. It was, thought Ben queerly, as if she had just remembered she had something she wanted to do.

After that, after what they had done, even the women remained apart from each other. They left meals for their men in the "neutral" strip, then shuffled back to their shelters. Most of the plates were untouched when they came back for them.

Ben didn't try to find Esther.

HE SPENT a full and frustrating day with Jim on the Beacon, but evening brought anything but rest. Two men started fighting over absolutely nothing —except raw nerves—and three others saw fit to join in for the same reason. Before Ben and his crew could stop it, one man was near death from an axe wound in his neck, and two more were badly cut up.

Tom Dockman took advantage of the fight. He was a quiet, sandy-haired man in his forties, and he took out a pistol he had hidden since the day of the riot and shot his wife in the head six times. Each time, (those who were near reported later) the bullets came within an inch of the woman and then disappeared in a hazy blue spot.

When Dockman found that it couldn't be done, he moaned something at his wife and put the pistol to his own head. It worked fine for him.

The way the woman looked after that, Ben was sorry Dockman hadn't had his way. She told Ben she hadn't really believed she couldn't die, so she asked her husband to shoot her. There was little sleep for anyone the rest of the night. Every time Ben thought about the guns in the camp the hair on his neck began to stiffen. He recounted the guns and put a couple of more guards around them, but by this time the inventory sheet had disappeared and he had no idea how many guns there had been in the first place . . .

* * *

On the third morning it was Mary Vaneck—a tall, dark-eyed girl who reminded Ben too much of Esther.

That evening, Mary came back. Ben knew pretty well what had happened when he heard the women screaming her name from the edge of the hill. He almost knew—

Harry Vaneck wanted to shoot his wife, but Ben knew he'd turn the gun on himself—and maybe all the rest of them too.

So Ben took the job. As he looked at her over the sights the thought passed quickly through his mind that there was enough of Mary left to know what he was doing and it was all right.

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When the shiny, featureless pink globe on her shoulders exploded she collapsed like shattered glass and there was no way to even guess what she had been.

So we're given this privilege, anyway, Ben reminded himself bitterly. After it's through with them—we can do what we want. He raised a quick and silent prayer for small favors.

Facing them, he realized with a shock that he couldn't seem to recognize any of them. There's not much left, he told himself, there's nothing left here to fight with . . .

"We didn't know," he told them, "we were afraid, and thought something might happen to them—but we didn't *know!*" Now, I can't—make—that—decision—again!" He moved from one face to the other and they returned his plea with silence. He realized they didn't care what he said—as long as he said something, told them what to do next.

"All right. All right, I'll do it. God knows what that thing out there will do to us, you know that? You know that, don't you!"

The silent faces turned away and left him in the clearing under the bright alien sun.

"We send no more, then!" he screamed at their backs. "All right? Is that all right? *No more!*"

They were gone, and Roy Tate was left, and behind him across the imaginary line, Esther. He looked at her, then looked at her again. There was something in her eyes that hadn't been there before. The frightened, fearful Esther was gone, and an Esther with battle-tired strength stood in her place. The warmly-smiling-showpiece, the sympathetic-ornament, the doll-with-flesh-that-really works was gone.

He watched this new thing that had been given to him with a vague sense of wonder. It was a dim star that rode into brilliance out of a dark cloud—and then the cloud covered it again and killed it and smothered its fire and he turned away from it. He suddenly remembered that stars burned and destroyed what they touched, and he could not recall when this had not been so.

THE critique arrived at its usual time that evening, and he glanced at it briefly and noted that Pawn had been returned through countermove L, or something. It was a cold epitaph for Mary Vaneck.

Ben had not copied the critiques since the first one. He read a few more lines and turned away. For the first time, he wondered vaguely whether they were winning or losing the Game—or if it made a damn bit of difference one way or the other.

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In the gray light of false dawn, the haggard figures stood around a weird assortment of unrecognizable apparatus that was wired, glued, taped and piled in the rough shape of a cone. Thick black cables snaked in and out of the cone itself and finally led off a few feet into a squat black elipse.

"By God," breathed Roy Tate, "it sorta *looks* like a Beacon."

"Well," said Ben wearily, "what about it, Jim?"

Jim Hubbard, who had been thin, gaunt and red-eyed before joining the Colony, looked barely human now. He blinked to keep his eyes open and squatted down next to the cone.

"I—I—don't know, Ben." He ran his hand over one of the dark cables and glanced nervously at the figures above him. "If it gets power, y-yes—maybe it'll s-send. I d-*don't know!*"

Ben closed his eyes, then jerked them open quickly as the dizzy waves swarmed in. He nodded toward the squat black elipse and took a deep breath.

"We've got about ten years of pretty substantial power in that fuel pile, Jim—it damn sure ought to be enough to send *one small* S.O.S. *out* of here!"

Jim's voice came out a high whine. "L-Look, I *told* you about that now, Ben, so don't you *expect* anything! It is *not* how *much* power with a Beacon—its how much *when*—if it doesn't go out with a—boost—it doesn't get where its goin'! Th-that d-d-damn thing," he pointed jerkily, "is a u-utility pile for givin' off steady consistent p-power. The way I got it rigged it'll either do n-nothing at all, or send our s-signal halfway across the d-damn galaxy—or b-blow the h-hell out of all of us."

"If I thought," Ben began, "you could promise that last one—"

The boy's mouth dropped and Ben said wearily, "All right, pull or push whatever it is you do. There's no sense waiting."

The crowd stepped back and Jim made a few last minute adjustments. Then he picked up his make-shift control board, looked at it a moment, then made a few quick motions over its surface. A slight hum came from the fuel pile, and an even slighter one from the "Beacon." Jim stumbled back and dropped the control board to the ground.

Ben felt the hairs on his neck start up again, and the empty pit in his stomach took the next step toward complete vacuity.

"That's—all? That's it?"

Jim nodded weakly, and collapsed to the ground. Roy Tate grabbed Ben's arm. "The pile, Ben—I checked it! The meter shows a little over three-quarters used up!"

Ben reached down and jerked

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Hubbard awake. "Damn it, Jim, is it enough? Did we do it?"

Jim frowned, a little surprised, Ben thought, that anything at all had happened.

"Yes," he nodded weakly, the stutter suddenly gone, "it *could* have done it—if everything else held together—it could . . ."

Ben layed him gently on the ground. "All right," he said, "if anyone feels inclined, pray someone hears us . . ."

THE waiting is the worst, Ben decided. At any moment, he expected retaliation, or penalty, or something for not sending one of the women. It was nearly an hour after the usual time for the selection and he could feel the oppressive tension of the others bearing down upon him.

If anything happens now, he considered, they're going to get up and do something. I don't know what—but something. He had a fair idea of what it might be—and the part he played was not a very desirable one.

Their senses were so numbed, their reactions so dulled—that no one saw it until the creature was halfway up the hill. Thad Baxter was first. He didn't speak—he just stared, grabbed Ben and pointed. Ben shoved his way through the crowd already forming on the crest of the hill. He was prepared for almost anything—except for what it was.

It was about waist-high, and it had large, fan-like pink ears that could almost be called transparent. The face was distinctly rodent-like. Gray, wrinkled skin was draped over protruding bones; and although the creature was completely hairless, Ben had the strong feeling that it had once, some time ago, been covered with hair or fur. It stopped a few yards away and held up a hand that was too closely human for comfort. Ben stepped forward a pace.

"First," it announced in a high, rasping voice, "I know your feelings and tell you I am not the Player. Am not responsible for the deaths of your females. I have great sorrow for you."

It seemed to be waiting for a reply. It turned small black eyes on Ben.

"All right. We'll accept that for now. Who are you?"

The creature raised a thin hand and shook his head. "Later for that. Now I have others. The Game is over. You have won."

* * *

No one could recall exactly what happened. There was a moment of stunned immobility, then chaos, in which the small wrinkled visitor showed a remarkable agility for avoiding death by trampling. Esther was through the crowd and in Ben's

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arms, and the pain of what had gone before was forgotten. She looked at him, and Ben said "I know you, Esther." Her eyes smiled, and she answered. "And I *know* you, Ben."

His name was Hsu-Kwaiu, as near as they could tell—and his story, told to the assembled colonists, was as terrifying as the one they had experienced.

"Our lives have run the same course," he said sadly. He explained how his race, the Ortai, colonized the planet five-hundred years before—and how the thing in the forest drew them into its deadly Game.

Squatting on his spindly legs, Hsu-Kwaiu told Ben, "We are long-lived, the Ortai, and have different, and stronger—abilities—than you. But we were not strong enough. Eventually, all succumbed to the Game. Now is only myself—out of thousand number who start."

Esther trembled against him, and Ben could feel the shudder that swept through the crowd. Their conclusions were obvious.

Hsu-Kwaiu seemed to sense their emotions. The visible pain in his face told Ben the creature's *abilities* included a highly-developed empathy that left him most vulnerable.

"No," said Hsu-Kwaiu, "Please—I am not to claim full understanding of nature of that which holds us here—but some advantage has been gained by you. Know this—*is first time any one has beaten it . . .*"

It took some time—but Ben and the others finally understood. Ironically, Hsu-Kwaiu explained, the Ortai had beaten themselves in the Games. Being a highly developed and sensitive race, they had some knowledge of the thing in the forest. They learned that the being was not entirely confined to this Time or Space, but was somehow bound in a complex manner to its planet. They learned that the artifacts in the forest had been built by another race—possibly the original dwellers of the world—and that some kinship or relation had existed between the being and the planet's early inhabitants.

All the Ortai learned was carefully calculated and used to play against the being in the Game. Too late, Hsu-Kwaiu told them, they learned that knowledge was not enough.

Then, nearly five centuries later, the human colonists arrived. By pure necessity, through lack of knowledge, the *random factor* was introduced into the Game.

"Could never happen again—never," the alien sighed. "Still, is within logical framework of possibilities, so element is present waiting to happen, so to speak. A good chess player can never beat a Master—but child

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with no understanding might once make random move."

His face twisted into what Ben believed to be a smile. "Is poor analogy lacking completeness. In unbelievable complexities of being's Game, random move has meaning none can fathom. Suffice to know that you —or 'part' of you—is playing Game without your knowledge."

Then, Hsu-Kwaiu seemed to search Ben's mind for meaning and said, "Is like blindfolded man with good hearing in sleeping state cheating at roulette with theoretical magnet."

The analogy turned Ben's stomach over twice.

"In final sense," Hsu-Kwaiu said, "is best to say whatever deities you consider have smiled upon you. This is a certainty."

"If our luck continues," Ben added, "we may be able to leave this world. Of course, Hsu-Kwaiu, you will come with us."

HSU-KWAIU seemed less than enthusiastic after Ben's explanation of the Beacon.

"Fortune be with you," he said sadly, turning away. "As for myself, I expect not to see my world again—but the thought is a pleasant one to contemplate."

Then, gathering his feeble strength, Hsu-Kwaiu rose. "And now must leave," he said. And without another word, he began to make his way across the clearing.

Ben caught up quickly and faced him. "Just like that? You're going? But where—and why? You explained all your people were gone, you—"

Hsu-Kwaiu's black eyes turned to stone. "*No*. There is no more to say. You do not understand, Ben Harker? Who I am? Why I am here?"

"Well, I—" Ben could only shake his head blankly.

"There is one question you did not ask me—and did not ask it because I did not allow it to be asked. Do you not wonder, now, that I have freed you of the *restriction to wonder*—how I have evaded the being for five-hundred years?"

Ben grew suddenly cold.

Hsu-Kwaiu nodded. "I did not wish to say this to the others. In truth, I have evaded nothing. Know how I have spent the long centuries—know that I have taken the part of a Player and daily suffered the things your females suffered—only I was the only one left, and the being *lives* to play the Game. So I was not allowed to die."

He faced Ben with eyes that were both cold and full of ancient regret.

"Know, then, that the thing out there who toys with our lives is far too alien to more than sense your presence here.

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It is only through myself that it can communicate with you at all."

Ben's fists tightened and the long days of frustrated rage welled up within him.

"No," sighed Hsu-Kwaiu, "you do *not see*. Understand that I am as helpless against its will as you are."

He paused a moment, and seemed to search deeply into Ben's eyes—into the depths of his being.

"This thing—it is not to be comprehended—but I tell you this, what I have learned and come to believe. It is even more a horror than you can realize, for I think it is not the superior, unbelievably intelligent entity the Ortai—and now you—have conceived. It is a thing worse than that. It is not only incomprehensibly alien—it is an unreasoning child—an idiot, a retarded mind groping forever in the prison of its own womb-like mind."

Hsu-Kwaiu shuddered visibly. "It is this thing—unpredictable and terrible—which holds us in its grasp. In recent years I have almost come to believe much of its actions are less attributable to alien logic than to childish irrationality." Hsu-Kwaiu shook his head. "But no, could not be—simply could not be. . . ."

Ben was silent. There was little he could say after Hsu-Kwaiu's revelations. Each time his thoughts settled on an entity the alien described, his mind rejected that pursuit with savage violence.

"One thing more," said Hsu-Kwaiu. "I have learned to inject some of myself into its actions—little, and to small avail—but some. Enough, I think, to ease the role of your females as they travelled the interdimensional paths of the Game. Did I not say, Ben Harker, that I shared your sorrow?"

And then he turned, and walked toward the bottom of the hill—and the forest.

"Hsu-Kwaiu!"

The alien turned slowly. "Ah, it comes. With release, you feel the need to ask the last question. I will place it for you: What occurs now? I do not know, Ben Harker. I have delt only with losers—never with a winner . . ."

And then he was gone.

DAWN rose uneventfully on the sixth day after Hsu-Kwaiu's visit. Ben discovered that fear is quickly supplanted by other emotions once the stimulus is removed. With each day, tension faded among the colonists.

Still, one part of every mind in the camp travelled through nonspace with the message they all now firmly believed had spread

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across the galaxy from Jim Hubbard's cone.

Admittedly, it was sometimes difficult for even a small part of Ben's mind to make that jump into non-space—or very much of anywhere beyond the warmth of Esther's presence.

Now, as morning announced itself, he watched her rise and leave him. She stood for a moment, running a comb through her dark hair, clothed in the pale translucence of the shelter. She pulled a robe over her shoulders and came to sit beside him.

"It's over now, Ben. It is all over and I know it will never come again."

Before, he might have read pleading in her voice, and her eyes; but now he knew she was not asking for assurance, but giving it.

He watched her, but the strength in her gaze remained steady. Then she came to him and what he had lost forever was returned, and he believed completely in tomorrow.

* * *

There was the scream and the running feet and the shattering of the dream. They were wrapping a white cloth around Roy's hand, and the red staining the white seemed unbearably bright.

"It was instinct—or habit, I guess," Roy said grimly. "And I guess I was lucky."

Ben understood. They had all become used to testing the field that surrounded them during the Game—especially after Ork.

Ben looked at Roy and Roy said "Yes. It's up again."

. . . But we won! Hsu-Kwaiu, you're there. Tell it we won!

For the first time, with an almost unnatural clarity, Ben fully understood Hsu-Kwaiu's picture of a childlike alien mind warping all logic and reason to fit its own completely self-oriented needs. A being that perceived the image of the universe, shattered it, and reshaped it to fit the Game.

But Ben saw something else—something Hsu-Kwaiu had not. Childish and mad it might be, but it was a precocious maniac—if maniac it was at all—and it knew how to get the answers it could not reason or re-shape for itself. It had, Ben believed, used Hsu-Kwaiu himself to find a solution that was readily available in its captive environment. It was the type of thing a selfish human child would do.

But this is not a child, not a child in any sense of the word I can understand. This is not a question of a four-year-old who does not like to lose—it is the demand *of something incomprehensible . . .*

The blue haze shimmered in the clearing.

*Best.....*it read,

.....two out of three?

THE END

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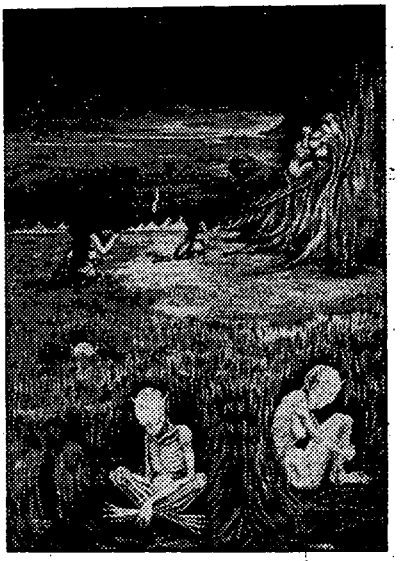
FAR REACH TO CYGNUS



By FRITZ LEIBER

Does the inner world lie inside the mind? Or out there in the world of things, nested on objects or fields? A good question, posed by Fritz Leiber's Dr. Dragonet, and solved perhaps, with a draught of his psionic elixir.

I SHIFTED my borrowed Hillman Minx into double low to help the brave but under-engined little dear scrabble up the last steep-shooting stretch of asphalted road to Dr. Hugo Dragonet's house, perched like an angular flying saucer about to take off from one of the highest pinnacles in the eastern end of the Santa Monica Mountains—a pinnacle overlooking Hollywood, downtown Los Angeles, Griffith Park, Forest Lawn Cemetery, and North Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley.

My heart was thudding like the engine of the Minx—not with overexertion, but excitement. Nineteen minutes ago the Enigmatic Engineer—of psychology and everything else, including

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wealth-winning cinematic devices—had said to me, "Arthur, I've discovered a drug that is to mescalin and LSD as they are to weak coffee. Come up and try it." Then Dr. Dragonet's voice, dry as Rhine wine, had broken off and bang had gone down his phone.

Sirens silent, an LA police car and black-and-white truck hurtled past me by all of three inches, almost scaring my Minx into the ditch. At first I thought their target was the Greater Cosmic Fellowship, and I shuddered to think what *that* might let loose on the world—if one could believe Dr. Dragonet's assertions about the GCF, which would have frightened a Communist or Birchite pea-green alike.

But the two police vehicles shot past the gilded gate in the Fellowship's white wall. Drawing up in the turn-around by the Doctor's house, they spewed out bluecoats and also brown-britches, who poured into the shrubbery beyond the house.

My thoughts whizzed: *My phone tapped . . . the Doctor's brazen invitation . . . a raid by LA's unsleeping Narcotics Squad, which has no respect for great secret scientists or any other kind.*

My Minx wouldn't whizz. In the nearest view window of Dr. Dragonet's cantilevered dwelling, in front of the tightly drawn pale drapes, I made out the Doctor's black cat peering down at the police.

I thought: *I hope you're playing lookout, Impet, and doing a right job of it. Snarl the alarm, girl! Fizz, "Fuzz!"*

The last two cops carried great nets trailing from iron hoops five feet across. I wondered dismally how Dr. Dragonet's erect lank silver-topped form would look hanging acutely bent in the mesh of one of them. Very dignified and intensely menacing, I decided impartially.

UNAIDED by the redoubling of my heartbeat, my Minx painfully crawled to the foot of the steps leading up to the cantilevered terrace-porch. Setting the brakes with a swipe of one hand and snatching up with the other my innocent-looking cane —which I have taken to carrying ever since my adventures with Dr. Dragonet began to go deep— I jumped out and raced up the steep steps toward a cloud-flecked blue sky, blown clear of smog for once by a steady west wind, and—here I slowed a bit, I couldn't help it—toward a very pretty pair of slim black-stockinged legs swinging coquettishly from the edge of the terrace still well above me.

I'd never met legs like *that* at any previous session with Dr. Dragonet. But then I'd never

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known much about his private affairs. In fact, I'd never thought of the old boy having any.

I resumed speed and soon, three steps from the top, I was looking straight into the dark eyes of the most delicious girl I've ever encountered. She had a slim pale face, humorous sensuous lips, and long black hair hanging sleekly yet unconfined. She was wearing black leotards and a black velvet cape which draped casually from her shoulders across the dull black flagstones of the terrace.

"Why the haste, my hearty?" she asked me tranquilly, sitting there and swinging her legs.

I pictured *her* in a net—or rather explaining to one of LA's hanging judges how she had been cajoled into smoking supermarijuana by a lewd and sinister pseudo-scientist old enough to be her grandfather, almost.

"I'm Arthur Gray," I informed her somewhat breathlessly, eager to create a sensation with my police raid news.

"And I'm Eduina Capasombrio."

Just then I saw it approaching her stealthily yet ripple-swift across the half-roofed, sunbright, shadow-dark terrace—and wondered for a split second if I'd already been somehow dosed, maybe by spray, with the Doctor's new drug. Then for another split instant I thought it was Impet, magnified by some illusion to thrice Impet's height at the shoulder and thirty times the housecat's mass. But *this* narrow black feline had eyes of blue fire and fangs with a steely glitter and its black pelt alternately shimmered and blurred as it moved.

I whipped my sword out of its cane-sheath and thrust it fast over Eduina's shoulder, at least an inch outside her close-fitting ear, just as the creature pounced.

The blade hit something and jarred, an electric shock traveled up my sword-arm, then everything went black before my eyes as if I were about to faint from excitement or fear.

I squinched my eyes and shook my head sharply. My power of sight came back. I stared around the terrace wildly, numb arm posing the sword for another lunge. But the black leopard was gone.

"Arthur, that was very uncool," Eduina informed me severely, "to go stab at a poor panting animal after the police and every idiot he-man with a gun have been hunting him across the hills for a week or more.

"Except coming so near my ear with your skimevitch," she added with a note of consolation. "That was cool, Arthur." She'd still not moved, though her legs were still swinging.

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At once the memory came back to me, making sense of the police nets, of the black leopard that had escaped from a private zoo near Tarzana and been pacing back and forth across the bottom of the front page of the *LA Times* for ten days, far below the black jungle treetops of the second-coming headlines about the illegal Soviet bomb-test.

"It didn't look one bit worn and weary to me," I said, still scanning shiveringly for the beast, which had really reminded me of one I'd read about in a science-fiction story—a lordly creature of evil with electricity for blood. "It looked all spruced up, as if it had come to take you to dinner—to be the meat course."

Eduina lightly shook her head. "Probably just wanted sympathy—or his horoscope cast. I'd want my Cat Stars read in his situation."

"Are there Cat Stars?" I asked.

"There are Dog Stars, aren't there?" she responded wide-eyed. I didn't quite know how to take some of her remarks and reactions. Kids change so fast these days that a ten-year age-gap sometimes seems like ten generations. With Eduina, I felt like I was blundering in the dark. Delightful dark, though, even better than iced Irish coffee.

THERE came low shouts, two gunshots, then a thrashing of underbrush from the other side of the terrace. I gave Eduina my free hand as she scrambled up. We ran across and looked down from the unrailed edge.

Twenty feet below, the police were tramping back to their cars. Two of them carried, in a double-over net between them, a sad sweaty-looking black leopard. Its fur was dusty too, but its chest was heaving and I could see no sign of blood. Evidently my sword, if it had ever really hit that leopard, had done no great damage and the police gunshots had been only for scare-effect. The Los Angeles police are good efficient guys, really—the amateurs wouldn't have been satisfied until they'd blown the creature to bits.

I noticed that the police had left behind them in the shrubs a small black suitcase. Or perhaps someone else had dropped it there first.

Alone I wouldn't have been noticed, but girls like Eduina are stare-o-magnetic.

"We got him safe and sound, miss," one of them called up. "You can quit worrying now."

Although my attention was still wholly on the netted leopard, I was tempted to call back, "I do not think worrying is one of the young lady's skills," but just then the same cop called up,

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"What's that weapon you got there, fellow?"

"A long shish-kebab skewer," I assured him, guiltily making sure my hand hid the silver-knobbed grip. Sword canes are decidedly illegal and although the LA police are often good guys, they are always sticklers. I was still studying the captured leopard, very doubtfully now.

There was a loud *hist!* behind us. I spun around. It was only Karl, the Doctor's sturdy butler and precision machinist, beckoning us from the porch door.

But I had already made up my mind. The black leopard the police had netted was not *my* black leopard and never had been.

Little Impet, peering around Karl's thick ankles, seemed to agree with me, for the black house-cat scanned about fiercely, then sprang back with a spitting *hiss* of her own.

I was glad myself we were leaving the terrace. Now that the sun was dropping out of sight and the west wind humming higher, the place had turned eerie.

Protectively—well, that was a bit of my reason—I shifted my free arm to Eduina's waist. Even through the velvet cape it felt remarkably slim and supple.

The big living room with its thick tight-drawn drapes was so dark I couldn't see anything clearly. I was annoyed at Karl for closing the door tightly behind us, then remembered what might be lurking outside and stopped feeling irked. Realizing other advantages of the darkness, I shifted my arm to the same position under Eduina's cloak. She didn't mind or maybe didn't notice. She was a very cool girl, truly.

THERE was a pale shape stretched above the center of the floor—on a low dark couch, I guessed. Or maybe floating there. Around it was a circle of eight motionless, weirdly hunched forms. I wondered if they were having drugged visions and perhaps drugged shape-changes, supposing the Doctor's experiment had already begun.

I started to ask, but Eduina breathed at my ear a *shh* that was almost a kiss, while from the pale shape there came a sweet monotonous voice saying:

"It's a blue blue planet, not from oceans, but from great prairies of blue grass reaching almost to the poles and dotted here and there with tiny lakes. Dipping closer, I can see herds of unicorns and tricorns cropping the blue savannas. Now, closer still, I see bands of slim elvish folk. Their naked skins are pale blue. They ride the unicorn, they pound a bluish grain to flour, they study the stars through telescopes with lenses of

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water and mirrors of liquid mercury curved by force fields. They dance to pipes and sleep or they meditate alone under their fiery moon . . ."

For a moment I could *see* the blue scene hovering before my eyes—so sharply that I wondered if there could be visions contagious like diseases and delusions—although the edges of my mind and feelings were still busy with my rather loony guesses about a drug-orgy and with *my* black leopard, the deadly one . . . and with Eduina, of course.

As the sweet voice died away, the living room lights came up softly. I looked at the pale figure lying in the center of the room—on a low couch, as I'd guessed—and my heart jumped about a yard away from Eduina and hung there for several seconds.

The pale figure was a long girl in an umbelted white flannel dress that covered her from neck to pink toes. Her tranced face had the lines but not the fullness of that of a Greek goddess. Her long hair outspread was a pale golden sunburst.

The eight weirdly hunched forms dissolved into eight of the Doctor's angularly asymmetric but comfortably cushioned chairs with five superficially normal-looking occupants. The three chairs to my left were empty. The next two held grasshopper-thin restless Professor Seibold and, clerical collar indenting his jowls, plump Father Minturn—two highly intelligent men I'd met before at the Doctor's sessions on those occasions when he'd wanted a thorough materialistic scientist and a thoughtful Man of God among his observers.

Next to the priest reclined a very tall, very thin nun in black flowing habit and a visored and veiled wimple which completely concealed her features. Not so normal-looking, that one, I had to admit.

The figure beyond that—just to my right—made my heart sink: a handsome crophaired sun-tanned suavely muscled young man in rather close-fitting sports jacket, slacks, and suede shoes, all dazzling white; his gaze was bored yet sensuous, raptorial yet veiled—oh, everyboys knows Jay Astar, the newest and most successful Brando-surrogate and homegrown Mastroianni to hit stereo, cinema, and TV.

My jealous and pessimistic mind instantly decided that Eduina and the blonde had to be starlets who had come to this session along with "Jastar." Such offbeat beauties could only be *his* girls. My spirits sank.

Why would the Doctor have *him* here? But then the Doctor rather liked film folks, the old fool.

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A LANK figure straightened briskly up from the only chair I couldn't see into, the one in front of me, and turned to face me with a supple unrigid military erectness. At times Dr. Hugo Dragonet looks remarkably like a Prussian or Czarist officer, or diplomat perhaps. His silvery hair was crewcut, his wrinkle-netted eyes gleamed with youth, the other lines of his long face were cynical-genial.

"Arthur!" he said, smiling warmly. Then the smile thinned a trifle. "Stop smooching my niece!"

I tried brazenly to hang onto her, but Eduina unhooked herself from my arm with a full turn that swirled her velvet cape away from her black-fitted body.

Dr. Dragonet's eyes twinkled. "Eduina, Mister Arthur Gray," he said formally. "Arthur, Senorita Eduina Capasombrio."

I bowed peevishly. My pessimistic mind—which at my birth had declared a cold war against my optimistic feelings—slightly redeployed its thoughts about Eduina: she wasn't the girl Jastar had brought, but the one he had come here to fascinate and lay claim to, probably had already done so. And the blonde too, of course. Who can win against stereo stars?

Dr. Dragonet might prove my ally, of course. I could even imagine him saying "Stop necking my niece," to Jastar too. But he was an old man, lost in his experiments and inventions.

Eduina went up to him. "Dear Uncle Hugo," she said softly. He bowed to her and as she pressed a kiss on his forehead, she looked sidewise at me with a peculiarly sly smile. By some chance his lips quirked at the same moment. Was Uncle Hugo really so old? Then she swirled down into the empty chair next his.

To fill the conversational pause, but mostly because I was really curious, I asked, "Was the other young woman actually seeing or clairvoying a scene on another planet? And is she under the influence of—" I hesitated.

"Of my new drug? Yes," he finished for me. "As to your first question, it's rather improbable she was *getting anything* interplanetary or interstellar. More likely something from her subconscious, or from the subconscious mind of one of us. Some forgotten fairytale, perhaps.

"However, there's this to be said for your suggestion," he went on. "Whenever I ask the young lady where her vision is coming from, she points toward the constellation Cygnus—the Swan or Northern Cross, as you know—whether it happens to be below or, as now, above the horizon, or night or day at the time. As far as I know, she has no knowledge of field astronomy. It's

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a suggestive circumstance, though really nothing to build on."

I nodded. Quite restrained for Dr. Dragonet, I thought, remembering the black goggles with which he had let us glimpse the glow of mentality diffusing from the galaxy and with which he had (so he claimed!) discovered the Greater Cosmic Fellowship to be a secret outpost—peaceful, he hoped, he told us—of black giant centipedal Martians *—a good example of the stranger denizens of Hollywood, if you can believe the Doctor.

The memory gave me a start. I wondered if *my* black leopard could be some creature or projection of the Martians.

The priest and the professor were looking at me peculiarly. I realized I was still holding my naked swordcane. Karl silently handed me its sheath.

Eduina began chattily to tell her uncle about the eruption of police and the capture of the escaped leopard. I waited for her to finish, intending to add my theory—conviction, rather—that there had been two black leopards.

MEANWHILE the fair-haired girl sat up on the couch, resting her chin in her hand. Her eyes were open now, but her classic face was still dreamy. She wasn't so long after all—it had been that white dress.

Jay Astar looked at her loosely draped form with a cool appraisal I found infuriating.

The two other men in the circle had begun to talk about the Siberian explosion that had us on the brink of war. Professor Seibold was claiming it had been a giant underground atomic test-blast which had got out of control and vented in spite of all Soviet precautions and secrecy measures. Father Minturn supported the minority guess that it had been an enemy atomic rocket, aimed at Krasnoyarsk and overshooting north. A Chinese rocket, perhaps, or—who dared say?

Palm outthrust protestingly, Dr. Dragonet called briskly, "Ladies, gentlemen, enough of these trivia! Roxane!——bring the psionic elixir!"

I looked toward the girl in white as he called "Roxane!" but she didn't react . . . and then from the next room came a third young lady bearing a tray with crystal-gleaming goblets and two bottles. She too was slim, wearing a blue suit and wraparound blue sun-glasses which somehow reminded me of the blue planet I'd heard described. Really, the girl in white should have been wearing them.

The third girl had dark red hair bobbed rather long. Be-

*"*The Goggles of Dr. Dragonet,*" FANTASTIC, July 1961*

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neath the masking glasses her lips were curved in an impudent, knowing smile. She wore blue net stockings.

Again my heart did that delightful devastating business of jumping a yard away from Eduina, or this time as much as two.

The newcomer set the tray down on a high taboret beside Dr. Dragonet's chair. Smiling compassionately at me, the Doctor said, "Arthur! Let me introduce you to my nieces Mademoiselle Roxane Rougecheveu—" He indicated the redhead, who sketched a curtsy "—and to Frauline Blondine Haarlang—" The girl in white nodded vaguely "—who belong respectively to the French and German branches of the Dragonet family, through the maternal line, just as Senorita Capasombrio does to the Spanish.

"Oh, by the way, Blondine," he called to the girl in white, "if you see any more of the blue planet, don't hesitate to break in on us, no matter what we're discussing." She gave another vague nod.

The redhead sat down in the farther of the remaining chairs and I in the remaining one—in the exact spot where my heart still vacillated midway between Eduina and Roxane, which was a good thing for my physiological integrity. Bad to have one's anatomic and amatory hearts in different places.

Working with skilled rapidity, Dr. Dragonet poured a pale yellow wine into seven of the goblets, then using a pipette, added to each exactly three drops of a colorless fluid from a glass-stoppered crystal bottle.

Gradually all eyes, even the lazy ones of Jastar, became fixed on the Doctor and his speeding hands. As he worked, he began to speak, quite casually.

"One of life's most fascinating problems, which science refuses to tackle, or shrugs off as 'metaphysics,' is the hook-up between the mind and the world."

I thought, *Oh nuts, a lecture on philosophy—when I want to hear about blue planets and black leopards and golden elixirs.*

FLARING his nostrils at me, as if he'd caught my thoughts, the Doctor continued, "To put it simply, *where* in the brain—or elsewhere!—is the space of my—or your—consciousness? Where is that clearcut shining scene which each sighted man or woman sees outspread before him while he wakes, or shimmering strangely in dreams?" He tapped the silver-lawned side of his skull. "Is it inside here?" He swept five outstretched fingers in front of him. "Or is it . . . out there?"

I thought, *Say, maybe this ap-*

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plies. Was my black leopard a living thing . . . out there? Or was it a projection from my mind?—or from someone else's mind! True, my sword had bent and my arm had been shocked. Yet the black leopard had had that glimmering appearance of a projection and the super-realness one associates with fever-visions rather than reality. And something had momentarily blacked out my vision, too.

Professor Seibold muttered to himself, intending to be overheard, I'm sure, "To try to measure pictures in the mind against the great world of matter, as if they were two maps which could be fitted to each other—naive!"

Dr. Dragonet caught it. He said, smiling, "When I was a child, I decided to be naive—which incidentally means 'natural'—forever. It's paid off—in fun and money too. Now to explore the problem." He lifted one finger. "First, is the space of consciousness *in* the brain? That would analyze down only to a pattern of firing neurons or lectric fields, not the vivid theater-like-scene itself."

He held up two fingers. "Or is the space of consciousness in another set of dimensions altogether? But that means there are at least two worlds, the world of things and the inner one—which offends against science's Law of Parsimony: the need to find the simplest explanation possible, to avoid assuming one more factor than necessary."

"I go for simplicity myself," Jay Astar observed, that rough sonorous voice of his ringing out for the first time, but it was hard to tell whether he was talking about scientific assumptions, or styles of acting, or clothes maybe—or at any rate I told myself that. I glanced to see if Eduina or Roxane were hanging onto the words of the white-clad male love-god. They didn't seem to be.

Dr. Dragonet continued, "Actually the second explanation involves a gigantic offense against the Law of Parsimony, for if each conscious being has an inner world approximating even to a small degree the world of things, then we are assuming trillions upon trillions of separate worlds—a vast unnecessary multiplication of structures."

PROFESSOR Seibold snorted, "You're just hanging sense data on a pre-Kantian space-time framework."

"Do you dig this?" I whispered experimentally to Eduina. She nodded curtly without looking at me. From Roxane's direction I heard a very faint chuckle. I cursed myself and concentrated.

"Or—" Dr. Dragonet went on, three fingers in the air, his eyes gleaming over his pipette, to the top of which his thumb was

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clamped to check its drip—"does the inner world lie out there in the world of things?—like paint on a house, or make-up on a woman's face, or wrappings of finest tissue on a box. De Broglie has said that each electron extends, however tenuously, to the ends of the universe. Why not the conscious mind? What if all our inner worlds lie out there, nested on objects and on fields, clothing with color and feeling the skeleton world of things?"

"More 200-year-old British metaphysics!" the professor jeered.

But, "Perhaps forming together one single great diversified communal mind, Doctor?" the tall veiled black nun across the circle from me observed in a harsh mechanic whisper which made me shiver. There was a faint dry rustling as she leaned forward. Jay Astar, sitting on her left, looked at her sharply.

Dr. Dragonet nodded. "Perhaps, Sister Marcia."

"The Mind of God," Father Minturn murmured on her right.

Dr. Dragonet frowned. "God—a word," he said harshly, "yet not altogether inacceptible. The communal mind would of course have within it a multitude of foci—our individualities. Not a Trinity, but almost an Infinity."

"Bits of mind strewn about," Eduina observed. "You make it sound like ectoplasm, Uncle Hugo." From my other side Roxane chuckled. The Doctor made a face at them.

Professor Seibold was angrily waving his hand. "I can see the stars," he asserted emphatically, but only for a moment mystifyingly. "How can bits of my consciousness lie that far out—hundreds and billions of light years away?"

The Doctor replied quietly, "Aristotle had an insight which we've neglected and derided: that vision goes out from the eye to the object and then returns to the eye. Perhaps consciousness operates that way, moving instantaneously or almost so, even though physical vision doesn't. Modern investigations suggest that psi- or esp-forces move at velocities at least far greater than light."

"But what I see in the stars happened hundreds and billions of years ago!" Professor Seibold rapped back. "The stars have moved since—they and the mind bits would not be congruent!"

"Most of the stars haven't moved far," the Doctor countered. "The dis-congruence would not be great and since we've hardly begun to log psi-observations we wouldn't have detected it just as the apparent movement of the stars with the seasons was indetectable to the ancients and medievals, so that they decided all the stars were set in one vast

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crystal sphere at the outer limits of the cosmos."

"You talk of psi-forces and forces of consciousness," the thin professor hammered on. "If they're forces, why haven't we detected them, I ask you, sir?"

"They are too feeble for our instruments to pick up," the Doctor retorted. "Psi-forces may be basic, yet so weak under most terrestrial conditions as to be almost indiscoverable—just as the basic force of gravity itself might never be discovered in a feathery world of free fall. Besides, most of us haven't the right instruments. The gravito-electric and gravito-magnetic spectra exist in theory, but they've never been observed in practice—with the exception of Ehrenfels experiment and one other *."

"Hugo," I cut in. "Would it ever be possible for the parts of the inner world which lie in the world of things to . . . well . . . operate independently?" I was thinking of my black leopard.

"There we enter a more speculative realm," the Doctor said thoughtfully. "But yes, Arthur, some of my most recent trials of the elixir have indicated to me that under certain conditions the contents of the subconscious mind of a highly repressed, highly energized person—a person with powerful drives—might be projected into the world of things, there taking individualized form, possibly animal, like some of Jung's archetypes, and operating for a while independently, with powers to move about and help or harm."

"This is preposterous! I ask you what—" Professor Seibold burst out contentiously, but at that moment Blondine Haarlang began to speak from her central position on the low couch, her eyes again closed, her voice a pleasant yet imperious monotone:

"Great black and silver spaceships are orbiting now around the blue planet. Boats land from the spaceships and discharge beings in great helmets and protective suits—perhaps the air is poisonous to them. They are humanoid but I cannot see their faces. They begin to explore and to test the direction of the wind. The elvish folk hide from them in the deep blue grass."

ALTHOUGH the room was light now, I again had the illusion that the scene Blondine was describing was hovering between me and her. For a brief moment it was frighteningly realistic: I could see the heavy-suited trampers through the grass and I peered in vain to glimpse their faces. I asked myself if it were remotely conceiva-

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ble that her consciousness, traveling some unknown superhighway, had gone out to a planet circling a star in the Northern Cross. On impulse I asked, "Where's the blue planet, Frauline Haarlang?"

Without opening her eyes, she pointed toward me, which was east—I know my directions in Dragonet's house—then raised her hand halfway overhead before she dropped it. That would be right for the Northern Cross at this time of summer.

"I think it's time we drank the elixir—before our speculations get too far out without its help," Dr. Dragonet said, grimacing apologetically at Professor Seibold. "Roxane, pass around the goblets!"

The professor frowned, grasping his goblet when it came as if it were a ceremonial mace. "I have further objections," he said, "but I'll reserve them."

I sniffed at mine, detecting no odor but that of Riesling. Some of the others sniffed too. I noted that Sister Marcia, the black nun, was holding her goblet close to her narrow chest in short black-gloved fingers.

When Roxane came to him, Dr. Dragonet waved her on. "The bartender should never drink," he quipped. "Besides, I have acquired a residual sensitivity from repeated doses."

He dropped his hand to the side of his chair and the lights very slowly began to dim. He said, "Cortisone is the best medical analogy I can find for my psychic or psionic elixir—which incidentally is extracted from the pineal glands of a strain of rhesus monkeys which have undergone certain stresses and been injected with various lesser drugs. Little has been discovered about the pineal's function in a century of research—but if the function is psionic, what orthodox researcher is going to discover that?—or go out on a limb about it if he does?" He shrugged.

"Cortisone makes tissues more permeable, so that healing substances can reach their targets more readily. It weakens the walls between cell and cell.

"My psionic elixir weakens the walls between the cells of the mind, between the conscious and the unconscious and all the other areas, many of them unmapped, unknown, unexplored.

"To an even greater degree it weakens the walls between mind and mind, between minds that are near and minds that are far, between minds that are almost alike and minds that are unutterably divergent. Indicating that we are not lonely little forts of mind, solitary "I"-machines, but instead we are points or rather foci in a great continuum of feeling."

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THE room had darkened considerably from the Doctor's rheostat, but I could still see faces, most of them with gazes fixed on his sardonic-lined yet now almost sorcerous one. Between myself and the Doctor, Eduina: a humorous "cool" girl, yet ageless-seeming now, a sphinx. To my left Roxane, her smile made enigmatic by her blue wraparound glasses. To her left, Professor Seibold: suspicious, hostile, rigidly poised—yet I could see his chest move with his rapid breathing. Then Father Minturn: benign, calm, perhaps too calm. Then the inscrutable black-veiled Sister Marcia. Then Jay Astar, lazily smiling, another calm one—but perhaps his hand was shaking slightly, for now he casually steadied his goblet against his white-trousered knee. And so back around the circle to Dr. Dragonet. In the shadows behind him was a dark blocky form—Karl.

And in the center of the circle, Blondine. She faced me rather than the Doctor, but she was not looking directly at me, but somewhat over my head. And her gaze seemed to go far beyond, through the wall, out into space, perhaps to her blue planet.

My heart skipped a beat as a black shape leaped to the back of Father Seibold's chair. Impet. The black housecat silently settled down there behind the cleric's head, though I doubt he was aware of her presence. She directed her slit-eyed gaze at Sister Marcia.

I thought about what the Doctor had said about subconscious minds being projected in animal form, and I shivered at the idea while I tried to reject it. I wondered about the subconscious drives of those around me.

The Doctor said, "We will drink one by one, around the circle, clockwise. That way the effects will be more interesting, particularly to those who drink first. I will point each time to the person who is to drink and snap my fingers to tell them when."

The forefinger of his right hand aimed at me and then the mid-finger slipped off the thumb and struck the groove between bent ring-finger and palm with a solid *click*.

The gazes shifted to me. I felt flustered—and a little resentful that the Doctor had made me the first to take the plunge into the unknown. For the first time I wondered if this drug were safe, had been tested enough—or, contrariwise, if it were only three drops of water. I glanced around quickly—why the devil should the gathering shadows pick this time to remind me of the black leopard the police hadn't netted? My left hand touched my sword-cane by the side of my chair.

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I was taking too long, I knew, making Eduina and Roxane think me timid.

Then I realized I had drained the goblet and was carefully setting it on the floor.

The Riesling's mild astringent sting was pleasant in my throat. There was no other taste.

LONG moments passed. I leaned back. I no longer worried about black leopards or what others thought of me. I was feeling relaxed and at home, as if some age-old stricture was being loosened. I wasn't even bothered that the drug was having no particular effect on me. Why did human beings go around tense and unhappy, thinking everything mattered so much? They missed the real juice of life.

I looked at Blondine, since that was easiest. The room was almost black now, but the Doctor must have switched a soft spotlight on her, perhaps to give us a common focal point, for her complexion glowed. I lost myself in her face. I'd always thought it was jewel-juggling or tiffany-flattery when a poet spoke of a girl having lips like rubies or rose-petals, cheeks like mother-of-pearl faintly shot with pink, eyes like sapphires, hair like a cloud of the finest gold wires. Now I realized that—funny!—it could be literally true.

Roxane chuckled. I was glad she appreciated my point.

"Do you notice any effects, Arthur?"

"The colors are richer," I heard myself tell Dr. Dragonet.

"Colors are richer," he repeated quietly. "In fully fifty percent of cases that is the first reaction of LSD or any of the mind-enlarging drugs, including my elixir. I suggest this is because they—and especially my elixir—open the mind of the drug-taker to the minds of those around him, so that he sees things not only through his own eyes, but also through those of others, which since we all see things and even colors differently, has an inevitable enriching effect. Incidentally, this would explain why mind-enlarging drugs have their greatest effect when taken in company, their least when taken alone."

Midway in this statement, he had clicked his fingers and I knew that Roxane had drunk. I agreed with what he said, in an idle sort of way, but continued to watch Blondine. Now it seemed that the light on her was moonlight—the Doctor has full-spectrum illumination in his house—for her lips had gone toward grape or amethyst, the mother-of-pearl or opal of her cheeks was faintly violet, the sapphire of her eyes more intense, the gold of her hair paler but with a note of turquoise or, no, jade. It might not be moonlight, but a

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scene undersea, with Blondine a jewel-scaled mermaid.

"Roxane," I said, "there's more green in those wrap-around glasses than I'd have guessed."

Only then did I realize the implication of what I had said. Not that it much surprised me. Meanwhile there had come another resonant *click*: signal for Professor Seibold to drink.

"Oui," Roxane replied softly. "And you, *monsieur,* have an exalted vision of girls. Expensive too."

"Hugo," I observed, "you've got almost too much light on Blondine."

"Young man," Father Minturn answered for him, "the room is nearly pitch dark."

I NOTED that except for Blondine the room *was,* well, moderately dark. I continued to watch her face. Gradually a discordant, almost angry note came into it. Not anything obvious. She was still beautiful, but it was as if her face had been dissected by almost invisible cuts into its parts—forehead, eyes, nose, etc.—like a subtly cubistic painting. After a bit I began also to see, faintly, a red network beneath her skin and then, more faintly still, a silvery one: blood vessels and nerves.

It occurred to me that Professor Seibold was making *his* contribution to the image—and that if this was the way a materialist saw the world and pretty girls, I didn't want any more than the sample.

At the same time the image was getting a surreal appearance, suggestive of Piccaso, which puzzled me, since I hadn't thought the professor was consciously art-minded, only analytic.

I suppose there must have been another *click* a while back, though I hadn't heard it, for a palely glowing tone came into Blondine's face, soothing the discords, brushing them over with a moonlight like Roxane's but milkier, so that the face acquired an additional quality like that of a china statue. This must be coming from Father Minturn, the idealizer, the spiritualizer.

But the Picasso-look was stronger than ever. The image of Blondine was appearing to me both full-face and, at the same time, in complete profile.

Then I realized that Roxane and I were seeing her full face, while Seibold and Minturn, sitting a quarter way around the circle from us, were viewing her profile. It was as simple as that.

All the varied images still added up to a girl's face. The totality, though strange, was still beautiful.

There was still another *click.* This time I heard it and I watched Sister Marcia's goblet

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creep up under her heavy black veil—which I still couldn't see through, although the light came up on her as I watched her, as it did on everything I watched.

There was an odd prolonged sipping or sucking sound, barely audible, and the goblet came out empty.

Just then Blondine began to speak again, a note of agitation rippling the sweet monotony.

"The helmeted invaders are firing the blue grass with flame-throwers! Towering red-yellow walls, smoke-topped, rush with the wind across the great savannas or creep against it. The elvish folk crouch unresisting in their grassy hollows, eyes shut, emaciated from privation or from intense thought."

I began to get a vision of that too—there were ghostly flames between us—but just then all my attention was engulfed by another change taking place in Blondine's hair and form. It was an image of her back—Sister Marcia sat across the circle from me—but it was an image which broke up the gold of her hair and the white of her dress into a checkerboard of large dots, like a very coarse-grained newspaper reproduction.

It was Blondine as seen through an insect's eyes, or possibly an arachnid's or chilopod's.

At the same time I found myself salivating and thinking, to my horror, that Blondine would be *good to eat*. The only reassuring thing about the impulse this thought gave me was that it seemed to be strictly inhibited.

I ASKED myself if Dr. Dragonet might conceivably have smuggled into our group one of the giant centipedal Martians from the Greater Cosmic Fellowship. I found this difficult to accept, as I had actually never seen one of the beasts myself and, to tell truth, half doubted all his stories about them. But if it were so, he was on closer terms with them than he'd ever told me—and of course the black-nun disguise a brilliant one. Mars—Sister Marcia—oh Good Lord!

Eduina's hand tugged gently at my elbow. I leaned toward her. She whispered in my ear, "Arthur I think you know that Uncle is an ardent de-segregationist. Just keep that in mind."

In my excitement I must have missed another *click*, for now I heard Jay Astar say lazily, "This'll be only my second drink today. Just another touch of wine and Doc's good old Elixir," and I saw him drain his goblet.

"Jastar and I had a session this morning," the Doctor explained casually, though with a hint of annoyance.

I felt a stab of jealousy that the stereo star should be deeper in the Doctor's secrets than I.

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Eduina and I were still leaning together. Impulsively I whispered, "Has that big white ape from the underside of the Panhandle ever made a pass at you?"

"Dozens," she assured me impatiently, as though I should have known the answer to that one. "I brush him off as gently as I can, he's such a child. My heart's still mostly with the family—you know, Uncle Hugo."

"Child gorilla?" I asked, still whispering, of course. "Another of those poor panting leopards?"

She shrugged, then quirked me a quick smile.

At that happy (to me) moment, Blondine burst out more agitatedly with: "I've looked into the helmet of one of the destroyers! They're a cat-people, black-furred!"

There was a flurry of small movements around the circle, touched off by the intensity of her voice, I suppose—or perhaps others here knew about the second black leopard. I know *I started* to think about it again—first the wild notion that Blondine had materialized on earth one of the cat-people invading the blue planet, then Dr. Dragonet's suggestion about a subconscious mind on the loose in animal form. *Whose* would it be, I wondered? Professor Seibold had shown constant irritation and a half repressed anger—*that* might be indicative. Yet the milky calm of Father Minturn's mind might be an even stronger sign of murky unconscious depths. Eduina *dressed* like a black leopard—that could be a clue; while Sister Marcia . . . there were simply too many hints! Why, even I . . . So far the elixir had given me no sight of my own unconscious mind, as the Doctor had said it would. Did that mean my subconscious had gone out of me? True, I had struck at the leopard, but would I know my own subconscious mind if I met it? Would anybody?

THE room seemed to have grown darker now, although Blondine's strange image still was bright, and I began to catch movements in the shadows behind the chairs—movements which stopped as soon as I looked straight at them. I wanted to call for real lights.

There was a *click*—signal for Eduina to drink. We'd be finished soon, I thought hopefully.

I returned to Blondine's image. Jastar's drinking seemed to have added nothing to it at all. Nothing rich in *that* mind, I told myself with a certain satisfaction.

Or perhaps the effects of the elixir were wearing off for me. Even the quintuple-exposure of Blondine was beginning to darken.

Yet at the same time I began to feel a growing tension and I

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sensed again the illusion—or reality—of movement in the shadows by the walls, as if some sinuous black beast were pacing there. Half rising, I openly peered around the room—even behind my chair, I have to admit. I didn't see any slinking animal either, but it could have been hiding behind one of the chairs.

The tension continued to grow. Sister Marcia was leaning forward now, looking taller and thinner than ever. Father Minturn's hands made fat white blobs where they gripped the arms of his chair. Professor Seibold was writhing his narrow shoulders and jogging his right knee very fast, like a chess player with a minute in which to make twenty moves. Roxane no longer smiled below her wrap-around glasses. Eduina had slipped off her cloak and was holding it over her left arm. Dr. Dragonet was sitting very erect, his gaze switching quickly from side to side. Only Jay Astar leaned back, serene—or just stupid.

I was leaning forward myself now, my left hand gripping my sword cane, my right hand on its hilt.

Her soft fur bristling, Impet came erect behind Father Minturn's shoulders with a spitting *hiss*. The plump priest threw himself forward on the floor. I didn't blame him one bit.

At first I was sure Impet was hissing at Sister Marcia. Then I saw that the target of the cat's alarm and anger lay beyond. Out of the shadow behind Jay Astar's chair there rose a narrow, high-domed, shimmering black muzzle with ears like silky spear points, eyes that were pulsing blue sparks, fangs that gleamed like steel.

Eduina sprang to the seat of her chair. Stamping on its arm and waving her black cloak forward, she shouted at the top of her voice at the black apparition, *"Gato! Hey, gato!"*

She was citing the black leopard as if it were a bull; she was calling, "Hey, cat!"

The leopard vaulted over Jastar and his chair in one enormous bound—a great curving brushstroke of glimmering black against the lesser darkness. But I had snatched my sword from its sheath and now I lunged high.

A dazzling blue flicker ran along the blade. Lightning flashed in the room, showing the pictures on the walls.

The blade bent double and broke. I felt twice the shock I had on the terrace, but my vision didn't go. I drew back to thrust again with my numb hand, not knowing even if it still held the broken sword.

THE black leopard came weaving forward again, then

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turned abruptly and sprang sideways, out of range of my defense, at Roxane.

An instant earlier Sister Marcia had launched herself forward, seeming to lengthen almost impossibly, in a long arc of her own, her black habit streaming. She dove over Father Minturn and Blondine, whose image had dimmed almost to darkness now, and met the leopard in midair. They dropped to the floor together and for a moment there was a scuffling and a horrid dry rustling, then sudden silence, broken almost immediately by our frantic voices.

The darkness was now complete.

"Keep quiet and keep your places!" Dr. Dragonet commanded.

A few moments later enough lights for an operating theater came on. They showed us all on our feet, with one exception.

Sister Marcia was standing like a slightly disheveled black pillar beside the door, half open now, to the terrace.

There was no sight of the black leopard anywhere.

In that mechanical voice, so chillingly suggestive of a voder rather than speech from a living throat, the black nun said, "I must return to my devotions. Thank you, Doctor, for an interesting session. Good night, friends."

Taking mincing steps and ducking her head to miss the lintel, which would have cleared my own head by two feet, she rustled from the room.

I wanted to ask her, "Do subconscious minds taste good, Sister?"

Professor Seibold wiped his forehead and gave of with an inelegant, unscientific "Whew!"

The one of us remaining in his chair, so quiet he might be a stereo still of himself, or dead, was Jay Astar. But when the Doctor lightly shook his shoulder, he came to with a headshake and a "Huh?" and then said in a voice from which most of the glamorous resonance was gone, "How'd the session go, Doc? I must of fell asleep, though I never thought I'd even relax, let alone nap. That Black Sister's starched underthings kept rustling like one of the big centipedes we had down in my granddaddy's house in Old Mississip."

"I heard nothing," Father Minturn said, a shade loftily. "But then I don't listen for such things."

Jay stood up shakily. "Geé, I feel awful weak on my pins. Like I was empty inside."

The Doctor steadied him, saying, "Karl will drive you home." Then, "I think we'd all be better for a breath of fresh air." He indicated the terrace.

I wanted to go beside Eduina

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to compliment her on her technique as a *torero*—or *gatero!*—and maybe fish for a compliment back on my own showing as a *matador*—or *gatador*—but she was chattering excitedly with Roxane. Father Minturn followed, half supporting Jastar, and behind them went Professor Seibold and Blondine. Dr. Dragonet gently held me back and as we drifted after them, he leaned his head and told me confidentially, "I suspected it was Jastar's unconscious mind all along. I like the film colony—I make my living off them!—but some of the newcomers are so single-mindedly ambitious and pushing that they're a public danger. They need their teeth—I mean their drives—drawn and I look upon it as a sort of civic duty to do so. Now he'll be a hollow man for months."

"Won't it ruin his career?" I asked, not too concerned.

"No. Most actors are only lay figures—puppets. His directors will position him properly and use a needle spot to make his eyes gleam and re-resonate his voice with an echo chamber and maybe use collodion to twist his mouth into the smirk his fans love, until something of his old energy returns."

I asked, "Would being rejected by just one girl fill a man like Jastar with such seething resentments?"

He looked at me sharply. "So Eduina's been telling you things? Yes, of course, the littler the big man, the more sensitive he is to slights."

"What do you think would have happened, Doctor, if the leopard had reached Eduina or Roxane?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a mild electric shock. *I* think she'd have had her face scratched off: Jay has—or had—a very strong feminine component, completely repressed."

"One more thing, Doctor. Is Sister Marcia really—" I began, but we were on the terrace now, near the others, and he lightly squeezed my arm for silence.

"Some creatures, even highly intelligent ones, feed on the body electricity of emotion as well as on flesh," he whispered briskly. "That's all I can tell you."

Now we were all under the stars, bright in the wind-swept sky. Automatically my gaze went up to Cygnus, that great five-starred swan winging high through the dark. Blondine looked up and then the others too, as she said tranquilly, "A terrible cold radiates from the pale blue dreaming elvish folk. The great fires in the blue grass shrink and flicker and die. The helmeted invaders rush back to their boats, but some of them are frozen in their tracks and shat-

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tered by their hurtling comrades —their heat vanished like neutrinos or spectrons. The boats take off and then the spaceships that brought them. But—" there was a catch in her voice "—the elvish folk crouch frozen too. Forever frozen, unless . . ."

At that instant, from a point in the heavens between Cygnus and Lyra, there came a tiny flash of blue light which lasted perhaps a second. The blue was the same shade as the grass of Blondine's planet. Real light, I asked myself, or the reflected gleam of consciousness? I had no way of knowing, but murmurs told me the others had seen it too.

"It didn't even come from Cygnus," Professor Seibold protested, possibly in some last-ditch inner defense of his materialism.

"No," the Doctor agreed. "Perhaps the star towing Blondine's planet has moved that far during the millennia it takes its physical light to reach us. Your own point, professor."

"Doctor," I asked, "do you think there's any possible connection between the black felinoids invading the blue planet and our own black leopard?"

He shrugged thoughtfully. "It is one of those grand coincidences, or congruences, which we'll only begin to understand when we've seriously studied the innumerable fields of psionics for fifty years or so."

We asked Blondine questions but, "I don't see anything any more. It's over," was all she would answer.

I joined Eduina and Roxane. The latter, with a grin, drifted away toward the Doctor, who was calling, "Karl! Better get the car out."

JUST then a siren sounded far off and came weaving up through the hills. We all stopped to listen to it—a little apprehensively, I imagine. Even the Doctor's elixir leaves one a shade jittery.

I scanned around. Below us, the lawns and flowerbeds and and gilt domed buildings of the Greater Cosmic Fellowship were dark, except for the tiny golden flame of one peace candle burning steadily.

Presently there was no doubt of the siren's destination, for it grew very loud and high white headlights came hurtling with it up the road. A squeal of brakes, a clatter of footsteps, and then three uniformed policemen and two detectives had run up the stairway onto the black-flagged terrace.

"Any of you here found a little black suitcase, sealed?" the first detective breathlessly demanded of us.

Karl stepped out of the shad-

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ows and handed him the suitcase I'd earlier seen lying in the bushes.

The first detective grabbed it, examined the seals closely, breathed a "Thank God," and then—although the other detective was signing him to be quiet—burst out with, "You people have saved our bacon! This suitcase has got in it the biggest haul of heroin we ever made in a single raid! When they went to get the leopard, some boob grabbed it up, thinking it was a case of teargas bombs, and then lost it here. We owe you a vote of thanks!"

The second detective pulled him toward the stairs.

Heroin, I thought contemptuously—and breathed a prayer for all poor thrill-seekers hooked on mind-darkening drugs instead of mind-enlarging ones—and administered without the benefit of Dr. Dragonet.

Karl helped Jastar down the stairs after the police. Professor Seibold followed with Father Minturn. Roxane, Blondine, and the Doctor went inside. I was alone with Eduina.

"Darling," I began, turning to her, "as a *gatero* you were magnificent—"

She interrupted me with, "Verbal compliments are un-cool, Arthur."

I put my arms on her shoulders and drew her to me.

"Arthur!" Dr. Dragonet's voice came sharply from the doorway. "I told you not to smooch my niece. Come inside, Eduina."

I tightened my hands on her shoulders, but she shook her head slightly, brushed her lips against mine, and drew away from me with a smile.

I thought, as she crossed the terrace, *Damn the man! Aren't two nieces enough for him?*

THE END

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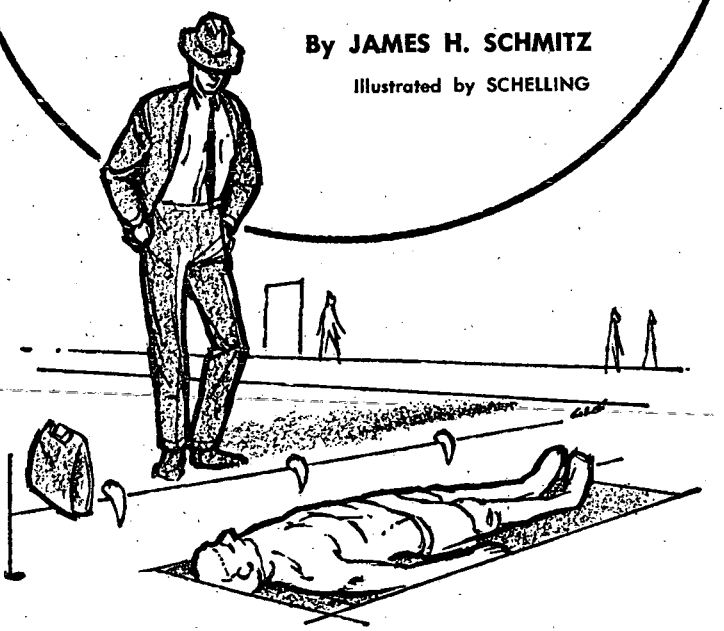
If you wipe off a cluttered blackboard, there is lots of room to imprint new information. Can a human brain be treated the same way? Can you make a superman if you start with a . . .

CLEAN SLATE

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

Illustrated by SCHELLING



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DR. Eileen Randall put the telephone down, said to George Hair, "It will still be a few minutes, I'm afraid, Mr. Hair." She smiled ruefully. "It's very embarrassing that the Director of ACCED should have to let his own employer, the government's Administrator of Education, wait to see him! But Dr. Curtice didn't know you were coming until an hour ago, of course."

"I quite understand, Dr. Randall," George Hair said politely. Eileen Randall, he thought, was not in the least embarrassed by the situation; and it was not the first time he had waited here to see Curtice. But her attitude interested him. She was belligerently loyal to Curtice, and her manner toward himself, on the other occasions they had met, had been one of cool hostility.

Today, there was an air of excitment about her, and something else which had drawn Hair's attention immediately. She was a lean, attractive, black-haired woman in her thirties, normally quiet, certainly not given to coy ruefulness with visitors. But he would have said that during the fifteen minutes he had been here, Dr. Randall had been playing a game with him, at least from her point of view. Back of it was a new level of self-assurance. She felt, he decided, somewhat contemptuous of him today.

It meant the ACCED group believed they had gained some very significant advantage against him. . . .

"What did you think of the dog?" she asked, smiling.

"An amazing animal!" Hair said. "I would not have believed such a performance was possible. I'm taking it for granted, of course, that the uncanny intelligence it demonstrated in carrying out your instructions is again a result of combined SELAM and ACCED techniques. . . . Or perhaps Dr. Curtice has developed an entirely new educational approach?"

"New in the extent to which selective amnesia was carried in the dog; Mr. Hair," Dr. Randall told him. "In this case, the memory impressions of every experience it had had since its birth were deleted from its brain before retraining began. The training methods otherwise were exactly the ones we have used on dogs for the past six years. The results, as you saw, go far beyond anything we have accomplished with animals before, due to the preliminary complete amnesia."

"Indeed?" Hair said. "I'm sure I've had the impression from Dr. Curtice that it was impossible to induce a complete and permanent amnesia by the use of instruments without actually destroying brain tissue."

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Dr. Randall gave him a look of gleeful malice. "It was impossible until early this year, Mr. Hair! That's when Dr. Curtice made the first full-scale tests of several new instruments he's had under development for some time. It's quite possible now." She put her hand out to the telephone. "Should I call the main laboratory again? Of course, they *will* let us know as soon as he . . . ."

"Of course," George Hair said. "No, no need to call them again, Dr. Randall." He smiled. "And it isn't really necessary, you know, for you to entertain me while I'm waiting, although I appreciate your having taken the time for it. If there's something else you should be doing, please don't let the fact that I'm here interfere with your work."

THIS was, George Hair told himself, looking out of the fourth-story window of the ACCED Building at the river below, a bad situation. A very bad situation.

It was clear that Curtice intended to use the complete amnesia approach on human subjects next, and Eileen Randall would not have spoken and behaved as she had if the ACCED group weren't already certain they had Wirt Sebert's backing for their plan—possibly even Mallory's.

And he would have to voice his unequivocal opposition to it. He could not do anything else. ACCED had never served any useful purpose but that of a political tool and the purpose had been achieved at an inexcusable expense in distorted lives. When applied to human beings, it was a failure, a complete failure. And now the fact could no longer be covered up by new developments and accomplishments with dogs.

Politically, of course, a promising new development in the program, if it could be presented in a convincing manner, was almost required now. It would be a very poor time to acknowledge failure openly. Governor Wingfield had been using rumors about ACCED as another means of weakening the Administration's position and creating a general demand for new elections; and this year, for the first time in the fifteen years since the Takeover, the demand might grow too strong to be ignored. A public admission that the ACCED program had not produced, and could not produce, the results which had been expected of it might make the difference, as Wingfield understood very well.

ACCED—accelerated education—had been Wirt Sebert's idea to begin with. Or rather, many ideas for it had been

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around, but they had never been systematized, coordinated, or applied on a large scale; and Sebert had ordered all that done. After the Takeover, the need for a major evolution of the educational system was obvious. The working details of Earth's civilization had become so complex that not enough people were able to understand them well enough to avoid continuous breakdowns. Immediate changes in simplifying organization, in centralizing communication had been made, which had helped. But they could not be expected to remedy matters indefinitely. What was needed in the long run was an army of highly trained men and women capable of grasping the multifactored problems of civilization as they arose, capable of intelligent interaction and of making the best possible use of one another's skills and knowledge.

ACCED was to have been the answer to that. Find the way, Wirt Sebert had said, to determine exactly what information was needed, what was essential, and then find the way to hammer it into young brains by the hundreds of thousands. Nothing less would do.

So ACCED came into being. It was a project that caught the public's imagination. For three years, a succession of people headed it. Then Richard Curtice was brought in, a man selected personally by Sebert; and Curtice quickly took charge.

At that time, indications of weakness in the overall ACCED approach already were apparent to those conducting the project. George Hair didn't know about them then. He was still Secretary of Finance—in his own mind and that of the public the second man of the Big Four, directly behind President Mallory. True, Wirt Sebert was Secretary of State, but Hair was the theorist, the man who had masterminded the Takeover which Mallory, Sebert, and Wingfield, men of action, had carried out. He was fully occupied with other matters, and ACCED was Sebert's concern.

Sebert, no doubt, had been aware of the difficulties. ACCED, in the form which had been settled on for the project, was based on the principle of reward and punishment; but reward and punishment were expressed by subtle emotional conditions of which the subject was barely conscious. Combined with this was a repetitive cramming technique, continuing without interruptions through sleep and waking periods. With few exceptions, the subjects were college and high school students, and the ACCED process was expected to accomplish the purpose for which it had been devised in them within four to five years.

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Throughout the first two years, extraordinary results of the process were reported regularly. They were still being reported during the third year, but no mention was made of the severe personality problems which had begun to develop among the subjects first exposed to ACCED.

IT was at this point that Dr. Curtice was brought into the project, on Wirt Sebert's instructions. Curtice was then in his late thirties, a man with a brilliant reputation as a psychiatric engineer. Within a year, he was ACCED's director, had selected his own staff, and was engaged in the series of modifications in the project which, for the following decade, would keep the fact that ACCED was essentially a failure from becoming general knowledge. SELAM was Curtice's development, had preceded his appointment to ACCED. He applied the selective amnesia machines immediately to the treatment of the waves of emotional problems arising among ACCED's first host of recruits. In this, as George Hair learned later, SELAM was fairly effective, but at the expense of erasing so much of the ACCED-impressed information that the purpose of the project was lost.

Dr. Curtice and his colleagues had decided meanwhile that the principal source of the troubles with ACCED was that the adolescent and postadolescent subjects first chosen for it already had established their individual personality patterns to a degree which limited the type of information which could be imposed on them by enforced learning processes without creating a destructive conflict. The maximum age level for the initiation of the ACCED approach therefore was reduced to twelve years; and within six months, the new phase of the project was underway on that basis, and on a greatly extended scale.

Simultaneously, Curtice had introduced a third phase—the transfer of infants shortly after their birth to ACCED nurseries where training by selected technicians could be begun under conditions which were free of distorting influences of any kind. The last presently was announced as the most promising aspect of the ACCED project, the one which eventually would produce an integrated class of specialists capable of conducting the world's economic affairs with the faultless dependability of a machine.

The implication that the earlier phases were to be regarded as preliminary experiments attracted little immediate attention and was absorbed gradually and almost unnoticed by the public.

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IT was during the seventh year of the ACCED project that George Hair's personal and political fortunes took a turn for which he was not in the least prepared. There had been a period of sharp conflict within the Administration, President Mallory and the Secretary of State opposing Oliver Wingfield, the perennial Vice President. Hair recognized the situation as the power struggle it essentially was. While his sympathies were largely with Mallory, he had attempted to mediate between the two groups without taking sides. But the men of action were not listening to Hair, the theorist, now. Eventually Wingfield was ousted from the government, though he had too strong and well-organized a following to be ousted from public life.

And shortly afterwards, Mallory explained privately to George Hair that his failure to throw in his full influence against Wingfield had created so much hostility for him, particularly in Sebert's group, that it was impossible to retain him as Secretary of Finance. Mallory made it clear that he still liked Hair as a person but agreed with Sebert that he should play no further major role in the Administration.

It was a bad shock to Hair. Unlike Wingfield and the others, he had developed no personal organization to support him. He had, he realized now, taken it for granted that his continuing value as an overall planner was so obvious to Mallory and Wirt Sebert that nothing else could be needed to secure his position beside them. For a time, he considered retiring into private life; but in the end, he accepted the position of Administrator of Education offered him by Mallory, which included among other matters responsibility for the ACCED Project.

Hair's first encounter with Dr. Curtice left him more impressed by ACCED's director than he had expected to be. He was aware that the project had been much less successful than was generally assumed to be the case, and his mental image of Curtice had been that of a glib operator who was willing to use appearances in place of facts to strengthen his position. But Curtice obviously had an immense enthusiasm for what he was doing, radiated self-assurance and confidence in ACCED's final success to a degree which was difficult to resist. There was nothing in his manner to suggest that he resented Hair's appointment as his superior; it was the attitude of Eileen Randall and, to a less extent, that of Dr. Longdon, Curtice's two chief assistants, which made it clear from the start that Hair was, in fact, resented.

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There were also indications that Wirt Sebert was not pleased with the appointment; and Hair suspected there had been a touch of friendly malice in Mallory's move—a reminder to Sebert that Mallory, although he had agreed to Hair's ouster from Finance, was still the Big Man of the original Big Four. Hair himself had enough stubbornness in him to ignore Sebert's continuing antagonism and the lack of cooperation he could expect from Sebert's proteges in ACCED. He had been somewhat startled when his first survey of the new situation in which he found himself showed that other activities of the Department of Education were of no significance except as they pertained again to the ACCED project. Dr. Curtice evidently had been running the Department very much as he pleased in recent years. It seemed time, George Hair thought, to establish whether ACCED was worth anywhere near the support it was getting from the government.

The Project was now in its seventh year. The initial experiment involving high school and college age groups was no longer mentioned and had almost dropped from the public mind. Hair's check brought him the information that a considerable number of the original subjects were still undergoing remedial psychiatric treatment at ACCED institutions. The others had merged back into the population. It was clear that the ACCED process had not had a single lasting success in that group.

Hair visited a number of the

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ACCED-run schools next where the process had been in use for the past three years. The age level here varied between ten and thirteen. He was shown records which indicated the ACCED students were far in advance of those to whom standard educational methods had been applied. The technicians assured him that, unlike their older predecessors, the present subjects were showing no undesirable emotional reactions to the process. Hair did not attempt to argue with the data given by their instruments. But he saw the children and did not like what he saw. They looked and acted, he thought, like small, worried grown-ups.

His inspection of two of the nursery schools was made against Dr. Randall's coldly bitter opposition: the appearance of a stranger among ACCED's youngest experimental subjects was unscheduled and would therefore create a disturbance; nobody had been allowed there before. But Hair was quietly insistent. It turned into a somewhat eerie experience. The students were between two and four years old and physically looked healthy enough. They were, however, remarkably quiet. They seemed, Hair thought, slower than children at that age should be, though as a bachelor he admittedly hadn't had much chance to study children that age.

Then one of the taciturn attendants conducting him through the school caught his eye and indicated a chubby three-year-old squatting in a cubicle by himself, apparently assembling a miniature television set. Hair watched in amazement until the assembly was completed, tested, and found satisfactory; whereupon the small mechanic lay down beside the instrument and went to sleep.

They had another trump card waiting for him. This was a girl, perhaps a year older, who informed Hair she understood he had been Secretary of Finance and wished to ask him some questions. The questions were extremely pertinent ones, and Hair found himself involved in a twenty-minute defense of the financial policies he had pursued during the twelve years he held the office. Then his inquisitor thanked him for his time and wandered off.

ONE could not object to ACCED as an experiment, George Hair concluded. An approach capable of producing such remarkable results was worth pursuing, within sensible limitations. The trouble with ACCED was chiefly that it was neither regarded nor handled as a limited experiment. Curtice and his assistants seemed completely indifferent to the fact that by now

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the processes had been applied to well over fifty thousand cases, only a handful of which had been under their immediate supervision. The number was increasing annually; and if the second and third groups were to show delayed negative responses similar to those of the first, the damage might not become apparent for several more years but would then be enormously more significant than the development of a relatively few precocious geniuses.

Hair took his figures to Mallory, pointed out the political dangers of failure if ACCED was continued on its present scale, recommended cutting it back sharply to the level of a controlled experiment until Curtice's group was able to show that the current stages of their work would not bog down in the same type of problems as the first had done. This would release department funds for the investigation of other approaches to the educational problem which could be brought into development if it appeared eventually that ACCED had to be written off.

Mallory heard him out, then shook his head.

"I've been aware of what you've told me, George," he said. "The trouble is that neither you nor I have the background to understand fully what Curtice is up to. But the man has a fantastic mind. There's nobody in his field to approach him today. He feels he needs the kind of wide, general experimentation he's getting through ACCED and his work with SELAM to produce the information he's after. I've seen some of the results of both, and I'm betting on him!"

He added thoughtfully, "If you're right in suspecting that the approach has an inherent weakness in it which will make it ultimately unusable, it'll show up within another few years. Time enough then to decide what to do. But until we do have proof that it isn't going to work, let's let the thing ride."

He grinned, added again, "Incidentally, I'll appreciate being kept informed on what's going on in the department. ACCED is Wirt's baby, of course, but there's no reason it should be his baby exclusively. . . ."

Which made Hair's role clear. Mallory was curious about Sebert's interest in ACCED, had wanted a dependable observer who would be associated closely enough with the project to detect any significant developments there. Hair was now in a position to do just that. But he was not to interfere with Curtice because that would defeat Mallory's purpose.

Hair accepted the situation. He could not act against Sebert's wishes unless he had Mallory's

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authority behind him; and if Mallory had decided to wait until it was certain Curtice had failed, his role must remain that of an investigator. In time, the evidence would present itself. The reports he was receiving from the ACCED Building could not be considered reliable, but he was installing his own observers at key points in the project; and if that did not increase his popularity with Curtice and his colleagues, it would insure, Hair thought, that not too much of what was done escaped his attention. In addition, there was an obvious pattern to the manner in which the various project activities were stressed or underemphasized which should serve to guide him now.

THE emphasis during the next two years shifted increasingly to SELAM. After the first wave of acute psychoneurotic disturbances had subsided, Curtice's selective amnesia machines had played a limited role in the ACCED project itself; but they had been used experimentally in a variety of other ways. SELAM, when it was effective, produced a release of specific tensions by deleting related portions of the established neural circuitry and thereby modifying the overall pattern of the brain's activity. It had a record of successful applications in psychiatric work, the relief of psychosomatic problems, some forms of senility, in the rehabilitation of criminals, and finally in animal experiments where the machines could be used to their fullest scope. The present limiting factor, according to Curtice, lay in the difficulty and the length of time required to train a sufficient number of operators up to the necessary level of understanding and skill in handling the machines. Most of SELAM's more spectacular successes had, in fact, been achieved by himself and a handful of his immediate associates.

The story was now that this problem was being overcome, that a corps of SELAM experts soon would be available to serve the public in various ways, and that the average citizen could expect a number of direct benefits for himself, including perhaps that of a virtual rejuvenation, in the foreseeable future. George Hair did not give such attention to these claims. They were, he thought, another distraction; meanwhile, ACCED could receive correspondingly less publicity. And ACCED, as a matter of fact, if it had not yet encountered a renewed serious setback, was, at least, being slowed down deliberately in order to avoid one. A number of the teen-age schools had quietly closed, the students having been transferred to country camps

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where the emphasis was on sports and recreation, while accelerated education had been reduced to a few hours a day. Curtice admitted privately that certain general danger signals had been noted and that a pause in the overall program was indicated until the difficulties had been analyzed and dealt with. He did not appear unduly concerned.

It was during the third year following Hair's attempt to persuade Mallory to have ACCED cut back at once to the level of experimental research that Oliver Wingfield launched his first public attacks on the project. Wingfield was then campaigning for the governorship he was to win with startling ease a few months later, while continuing his crusade for the general elections he hoped would move him into the top spot in the Administration. The detailed nature of his charges against ACCED made it evident that he had informants among the project personnel.

It put George Hair in a difficult position. If it was a choice between supporting Wingfield and supporting Mallory, he much preferred to support Mallory. This was due less to his remaining feelings of friendship for Mallory than to the fact that Oliver Wingfield's policies had always had an aspect of angry destructiveness about them. As one of the Big Four, he had been sufficiently held in check; his pugnaciousness and drive had made him extremely useful then. If he was allowed to supplant Mallory, however, he would be a dangerous man.

In all reason, Hair thought, they should have closed out ACCED before this. The political damage would have been insignificant if the matter was handled carefully. To do it now, under Wingfield's savage criticism, would be a much more serious matter. The government would appear to have retreated under pressure, and Wingfield's cause would be advanced. But he was not sure the step could be delayed much longer.

Then he had his first reports of six-year-old and seven-year-old psychotics in several of the nursery schools. They were unofficial reports coming from his own observers; and the observers were not entirely certain of their facts; the local school staffs had acted immediately to remove the affected children, so that the seriousness of their condition could not be ascertained. It looked bad enough; it was, in fact, what Hair had expected and, recently, had feared. But he told himself that these might be isolated cases, that there might not be many more of them. If that turned out to be true, the matter conceivably could be ignored un-

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til the political climate again became more favorable to the government.

Unless, of course, Oliver Wingfield heard of it. . . .

Wingfield apparently didn't hear of it. His attacks during the next few weeks were directed primarily at the camps for ACCED's teen-age subjects. Curtice's group had volunteered no information on the incidents to Hair; and Hair did not press them for it. For a while, there was a lull in the reports of his observers.

Then the reports began to come in again; and suddenly it was no longer a question of isolated incidents. An epidemic of insanity was erupting in the ACCED nursery schools, and Hair knew he could wait no longer.

HE had come to the ACCED Building expecting to find Curtice and his associates evasive, defensive, perhaps attempting to explain away what could no longer be explained away. That they might have the gall even now to think that giving the project another shift would avert the storm of public criticism due to burst over ACCED as soon as Wingfield's informants learned of the swiftly rising number of psychotic children in the nursery schools would never have occurred to him if he had not been warned by Eileen Randall's manner. Even so, he felt shocked and amazed.

The ACCED group might delude itself to that extent, he thought. But Wirt Sebert must be standing behind them in this. And how could Sebert show such incredibly bad judgment? Further, at so critical a time, Sebert would have conferred with Mallory before committing himself to giving Curtice further support, and Mallory must have agreed to it.

He could not believe that of Philip Mallory. Unless . . . .

George Hair stood frowning

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out of the window of the ACCED Building at the river curving through the valley below. Unless, he thought, Curtice had, in this time, come up with a genuine breakthrough, something indisputable and of great and exciting significance, something that could not be challenged. Because that might still do it, stifle Wingfield's declamations and dim the picture of lunatic children in the public's mind. The public forgot so easily again.

"Mr. Hair," Eileen Randall's voice purred from the doorway.

Hair turned. Her mouth curved into a condescending smile.

"Will you come with me, please? They're waiting to see you now. . . ."

A hundred feet down the hallway, she opened the door to Curtice's big office for him. As Hair stepped inside, he was barely able to suppress a start of surprise. Beside Curtice and Dr. Longdon, there was a third man in the office whose presence, for a moment, seemed completely incongruous.

"Good morning, Felix," Hair said. "I didn't expect to find you here."

Felix Austin, Chief Justice and President Mallory's right-hand man for the past five years, smiled briefly. He was tall and sparse, in his late fifties, almost exactly Hair's age.

"As a matter of fact, George," he said, "I hadn't expected to meet you today either. But I happened to be in the building, and when I heard you wanted to speak to Dr. Curtice, I thought I might sit in on the discussion. If you'd rather I'd leave, I shall do it at once, of course."

Hair shook his head. "No, you're quite welcome to stay." He took a seat, laid the briefcase he had brought with him on his knees. Eileen Randall sat down across the room from him, not far from Curtice.

Hair's fingers were trembling, though not enough to be noticed by anyone but himself, as he opened the briefcase and drew out three copies of a resume made up from the reports of his ACCED observers during the past six weeks. Austin's presence, of course, was not a coincidence; and he wasn't expected to believe that it was. He was being told that he should not count on Mallory backing him against Curtice today. He had suspected it, but the fact still dumbfounded him because he could not see Mallory's motive. He looked at Eileen Randall.

"Dr. Randall," he said, "I have here three copies of a paper I should like the group to see. Please give one each to Dr. Curtice and the Chief Justice. Perhaps you and Dr. Longdon will be willing to share the third."

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Eileen Randall hesitated an instant, then stood up, came over and took the papers from him. Austin cleared his throat.

"We're to read this immediately, George?" he asked.

"Please do," Hair said.

HE watched them while they read. Austin frowned thoughtfully; Curtice seemed completely uninterested. Longdon and Eileen Randall exchanged occasional glances. Curtice finished first, waited until the others put down their copies.

He said then, "These figures are remarkably accurate, Mr. Hair. Of course, we've known you had good men working for you. The current incidence is perhaps a trifle higher than shown." He looked over at Dr. Longdon. "About eight per cent, wouldn't you say, Bill?"

"Approximately," Longdon agreed.

"We understand and appreciate your concern, Mr. Hair," Curtice went on with apparent sincerity. "But as it happens"—his forefinger tapped the resume—"this is not a matter which need give any of us concern, although you were not in a position to know it. The situation was anticipated. We have been sure almost from the beginning that immature brains would not be able to absorb the vast volume of information forced on them by ACCED indefinitely, and that the final result would be the acute stress and confusion expressed in these figures."

"You were sure of it almost from the beginning?" Hair repeated.

"I became convinced of it personally within a few months after I was brought into the project," Curtice said.

George Hair stared at him. "Then, in Heaven's name, why—if you were certain of eventual failure—did you continue with these monstrous experiments for years?"

"Because," Curtice said patiently, "they were producing a great deal of information—information we absolutely needed to have, absolutely needed to test in practice."

"For what purpose?" Hair demanded. He looked over at Austin. "Felix, you're informed of what these people have been doing?"

Austin nodded. "Yes, I am, George." His voice and face were expressionless.

"Then supposing you. . . ."

"No, let Dr. Curtice tell it, George. He can answer your questions better than I can."

It appeared, Hair thought, that Austin was deferring deliberately to Curtice, to make it clear that Curtice was now to be considered the equal of either of them.

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"We needed the information," Curtice continued, as if there had been no interruption, "for a purpose it would not have been advisable to make public at the time. It would have made much of the research we were planning virtually impossible, particularly since we had no way of proving, even to ourselves, that what we wanted to do could be accomplished. Even today, less than two dozen people are fully informed of the plan.

"Our purpose, Mr. Hair, was and is the creation of a genuine superman—a man who will be physically and mentally as fully developed as his genetic structure permits. I have had this goal in mind for many years—it has been the aim of all my experiments with SELAM. When ACCED was formed, I saw the possibilities of incorporating its methods into my own projects. I went to Secretary Sebert and informed him of my plans. That was why I was made Director of the ACCED project. All ACCED's activities since that day have been designed solely to supply us with further information."

"And how," Hair asked, making no attempt to keep the incredulous distaste he felt out of his voice, "do you propose to go about creating your superman?"

Curtice said, "An adult brain, and only an adult brain, has the structural capacity to assimilate the information supplied by the accelerated educational processes as it streams in. A child's brain is not yet structured to store more than a limited amount of information at a time. It is developing too slowly to meet our purpose.

"But, as the first experiments with ACCED showed, an adult brain, even the brain of a young adult, already has accumulated so much distorted information that the swift, orderly inflow of ACCED data again produces disastrous conflicts and disturbances. Hence the work with SELAM techniques during these years. We know now that a brain fully developed and mature, but with all memory, all residual traces of the life experiences which brought about its development removed from it, can be taught everything ACCED can teach, perhaps vastly more—it will be able to absorb and utilize the new information completely."

THERE was a long pause. Then Hair said, "And that is the story you will tell the public? That you can delete all a man's present memories, subject him to the ACCED processes, and finally emerge with a new man, an ACCED-trained superman—who happens to have been the goal of the project all along?"

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"Essentially that," Curtice said.

Hair shook his head. "Dr. Curtice," he said, "I don't believe that story! Oliver Wingfield won't believe it. And, this time finally, the public won't believe it. You're just looking for another lease of time to continue your experiments."

Curtice smiled without rancor, glanced at Austin.

"Felix," he said, "perhaps you'd better talk to him, after all."

Austin cleared his throat.

"It's true enough, George," he said. "Dr. Curtice has proof that he can do exactly as he says."

Hair looked back at Curtice.

"Does that mean," he asked, "that you actually have produced such a superman?"

"No," Curtice said. He laughed, apparently with genuine amusement now. "And with very good reason! We know we can remove all memory traces from a human brain and leave that brain in undamaged condition and in extremely good working order. We have done it with subjects in their seventieth year of life as well as with subjects in their fifth year of life, and with no greater basic difficulty. We also have applied modified ACCED methods to the five-year-old subjects and found they absorbed information at the normal rate of a newly born infant —much too slowly, as I have explained, for our purpose. but we have not applied ACCED methods of instruction to the adult memoryless subjects. We want supermen, but we want them to be supermen of our selection. That's the next and the all-important stage of the project."

"Then," George Hair said flatly, "I still do not believe you, and the public will not believe you. Your story will be put down as another bluff."

Curtice smiled faintly again.

"Will it?" he asked. "If the Director of ACCED becomes the first subject to undergo the total process?"

Hair's mouth dropped open. "You are to be . . . ."

"And if," Curtice went on, "Chief Justice Felix Austin has volunteered to be the second subject?"

Hair looked in bewilderment from one to the other of them.

"Felix, is this true?"

"I fully intend to be the second subject," Austin told him seriously. "This is a big thing, George—a very big thing! The third and fourth subjects, incidentally, following Dr. Curtice and myself by approximately two years, will be President Mallory and Secretary Sebert. . . ."

GEORGE HAIR sat in his study, watching the public reaction indicator edge up above

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the seventy-two mark on the positive side of the scale. Two hours before, just after the official announcement of the government's Rejuvenation Program was made, the indicator had hovered around forty. The response had been a swift and favorable one, though no more favorable than Hair had expected.

It was a little over five weeks since his meeting with Curtice and Felix Austin in the ACCED Building. Mallory's and Sebert's publicity staffs had been in full action throughout that time, operating indirectly except for an occasional, carefully vague release which no more than hinted at a momentous development to come. The planted rumors were far more direct. "Rejuvenation" was a fully established concept in the public mind days before the actual announcement; the missing details, however, were the sensational and unexpected ones —precisely the explosive touch required to swing the skeptical and merely curious over to instant support of the official program.

Curtice's goal of the ACCED-trained mental superman was being played down at present; it was less tangible, of far less direct interest, than the observable response of an aging body to the complete SELAM process. Hair had seen the seventy-year-old subjects of whom Curtice had told him. They were old men still, but old men from whom the physical and emotional tensions of a lifetime had been drained together with the memory traces of a lifetime. The relaxed, sleeping bodies had fleshed out again, become strong and smooth-skinned, presenting the appearance of young maturity. They gave credibility to Curtice's claim, based on comparable work with animals, that SELAM now offered humanity a life extension of at least sixty healthy years.

The public had seen those same rejuvenated bodies in the tridi screens today. It had listened while Curtice explained the developments in his SELAM machines which had brought about the miracle, and watched him walk smiling into the laboratory where he was to become the first human being to whom the combined SELAM and ACCED techniques would be fully applied.

Those were compelling arguments. The superman theme had been barely introduced but would grow in significance as the implications of Felix Austin following Curtice within a few months, and Mallory and Sebert following Austin within two years, were considered. What the leaders wanted for themselves, the public wanted. Unofficially, the word already was out that when the President and Secretary received the Rejuvenation

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treatment, a hundred deserving citizens would receive it with them, that SELAM and ACCED would become available to all whose personal records qualified them for the processes as quickly as Dr. Curtice's intricate machines could be duplicated and technicians trained in their use.

There was no question, George Hair thought, that the bait was being swallowed. And the thought appalled him. On the one occasion he'd spoken with Philip Mallory during the past weeks, he had brought up the subject of loss of individuality, of personality, by the SELAM process and in the subsequent period when, within a year and a half, a new mentality would be created by machines in the emptied, receptive brain, perhaps a vastly more efficient mentality but nevertheless . . . .

And Mallory had looked at him shrewdly, and laughed.

"The old Phil will be there again, George—don't worry!" he'd said. "I'm not suddenly rushing into this thing, you know. We can't talk about everything Dick Curtice has done with SELAM, but I've seen enough of his half-way jobs to go ahead." He gave Hair a conspiratorial dig with his elbow. "If Curtice weren't as far along as he is, Wingfield would have had our skins before summer! That's part of it. The other part of it is that I'm sixty-four and Sebert's sixty-six. You're fifty-eight yourself. We can all use some freshening up if we're to stay on top of the pile. . . ."

That had been the lure for Mallory. If it hadn't been for the pressures being built up by Wingfield, Hair thought, Mallory need have felt no concern about remaining on top for another twenty years. But he'd seen the developing threat and prepared quietly to more than match it with a bold, overwhelming move of his own. A new Big Four was in the making, a Big Four of supermen, with Curtice in Hair's position as thinker and theorist, Felix Austin in Wingfield's, while Mallory and Sebert remained the central two, the leaders. Hair had no illusions about his own prospects in the new era. As Administrator of Education, he had remained a popular, almost legendary figure; but it was clear now that it had been a popularity skillfully maintained by Mallory's publicity machine to give ACCED additional respectability in the transition period ahead. Thereafter, the legend would be allowed to fade away, and he with it.

He didn't, Hair decided, really want it otherwise. He did not share Mallory's will to stay on top at all costs . . . definitely not at the cost of allowing his personality to be dissolved in

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Curtice's Rejuvenation process, even if the opportunity were offered him, although he was already quite certain it would not be offered. The new ruling group would have no further need of him.

He could resign now; but it would be awkward and change nothing. The psychotic children in ACCED's nursery schools were no longer an issue. They had been mentioned, casually, as a detail of the experiments, now concluded, which had been required to produce Rejuvenation, with the additional note that their rehabilitation would be undertaken promptly. The statement had aroused few comments . . . He might as well, George Hair told himself finally, watch the thing through to the end.

DURING the next three months, he found himself involved frequently in the publicity connected with the Rejuvenation program, although he refused interviews and maintained the role of a detached spectator. Oliver Wingfield, stunned into silence no more than a few days, shifted his attack from ACCED to the new government program, lashed out savagely at Hair from time to time as one of the planners of what he described as an attempt to foist the rule of robot minds on normal men. Hair, not too sure he wasn't in some agreement with Wingfield on the latter point, held his peace; but Mallory's publicity experts happily took up the battle.

Despite Wingfield's best efforts, the Rejuvenation program retained its high level of popularity. The successful conclusion of the SELAM phase of the process on Richard Curtice was announced by Dr. Langdon. For the next sixty days, Curtice would be kept asleep to permit physical regeneration to be well advanced before ACCED was introduced by degrees to the case. Tridi strips taken at ten-day intervals showed the gradual transformation of a middle-aged scientist in moderately good condition to a firm-muscled athlete apparently in his early twenties. Attention began to shift to Felix Austin as the next to take the step, six weeks after Curtice's ACCED training had begun; and the continuing denunciations by Wingfield and his followers acquired a note of raging hysteria.

Three months and ten days after Curtice had submitted himself to his SELAM machines, George Hair came back to the ACCED Building, now the center of the new Rejuvenation complex. He was not at all sure why he should be there, but Longdon had called him that morning, told him there had been a very important development and asked him to come as soon as he pos-

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sibly could. There had been a degree of urgency in the man's voice which had made it difficult to refuse. Hair was conducted to a part of the building he had not seen before and into a room where Longdon was waiting for him.

Longdon's appearance underlined the urgency Hair had sensed in his voice when he called. His eyes were anxious; his face looked drawn and tired. He said, "Mr. Hair, thank you very much for coming so promptly! Dr. Randall and I are faced with a very serious problem here which I could not discuss on the telephone. It's possible that you will be able—and willing—to help us. Let me show you what the trouble is."

He opened a door to another room, motioned to Hair to enter, and followed him inside, leaving the door open.

Hair recognized this room immediately. He had seen it several times in the tridi screen during demonstrations of the changes being brought about in Curtice's physical condition by SELAM. As he had been then, Curtice was lying now on a sunken bed in a twelve by twelve foot depression in the floor, his tanned, muscular body clothed only in white trunks. His face was turned toward the door by which they had entered and his eyes were half opened. Then, as they came toward him, his right hand lifted, made a slow, waving motion through the air, dropped to his side again.

"Our subject is exceptionally responsive today!" Dr. Longdon commented, an odd note of savage irony in his voice.

Hair looked quickly at him, frowning, asked, "What is the problem you wanted to discuss?"

LONGDON nodded at the figure sprawled across the sunken bed.

"There is the problem!" he said. "Mr. Hair, as you know, our calculations show that an adult brain, freed completely by SELAM techniques of the clutter of memories it has stored away, can absorb the entire volume of ACCED information within a period of less than two years. At the end of that time, in other words, we again would have a functioning adult, and one functioning in a far more integrated manner, far more efficiently, than is possible to the normally educated human being, and on the basis now of a vastly greater fund of accurate information than a normal human mind can acquire in a lifetime. . . ."

"I know, of course that that was your goal," Hair said. "Apparently, something has gone wrong with it."

"Very decidedly!" Longdon said. "This is the forty-third day

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since we began to use ACCED training methods on Curtice. In child subjects—children whose memories were completely erased by SELAM at the age of five—forty-three days of modified ACCED produced a vocabulary equivalent to that of an average two-year-old. Curtice, in the same length of time, has acquired no vocabulary at all. Spoken words have no more meaning to him today than when we started."

A door had opened and closed quietly behind Hair while Longdon was speaking. He guessed that Eileen Randall had come into the room but did not look around. He was increasingly puzzled by Longdon's attitude. Curtice's failure to develop speech might be a very serious problem—might, in fact, be threatening the entire Rejuvenation program. But he did not see what it had to do with him, or how they expected him to help them.

He asked, "Have you discovered what the difficulty is?"

"Yes," Longdon said, "we know now what the difficulty is." He hesitated, scowling absently down at Curtice for a few seconds, went on. "A child, Mr. Hair, a young child, wants to learn. Not long after birth, it enters a phase where learning might appear to be almost its primary motivation. Later in life, it may retain the drive to learn or it may lose it. It has been assumed that this depended on whether its life experiences were of a nature to encourage the learning urge, or to suppress and eventually to stifle it.

"Now it appears that this is only partly true. Later life experiences may indeed foster and even create a learning urge of their own. But the natural drive, the innate drive, apparently is present only for a comparatively short time in childhood. It is not, in itself, a permanent motivation in man.

"Dr. Curtice's biological age is nearly fifty years. Before SELAM wiped the effects of his life experiences from him, he was, of course, a man intensely interested in learning, intensely curious. But his curiosity and interest were based on the experiences he has lost, and were lost with them. And he is decades past the age where the innate drive to learn could still motivate him.

"We can teach him almost nothing because he is inherently uninterested in learning anything. We have used every conceivable method to stimulate interest and curiosity in him. Intense pleasure or severe pain will produce corresponding reactions, but when the sensations end, he appears to forget them quickly again.

"There is, however, a barely detachable learning curve, which can be projected. In twenty

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years, by the consistent use of brutally drastic methods, we should be able to train Dr. Curtice's brain to the point where he could comprehend very simple instructions. By that time, of course, the training process itself would have produced such severe physical and emotional stresses that the rejuvenating effect of SELAM would have been lost, and he would be showing—at the very least—his actual physical age."

Dr. Longdon shrugged, spread his hands, concluded, "So at best, Mr. Hair, we might wind up eventually with a very stupid, very dull old man of seventy.

EILEEN RANDALL's voice said harshly behind Hair, "Mr. Hair, it is not nearly as hopeless as that! Not nearly!"

She went on vehemently, as he turned to look at her. "We simply need time! Time to understand what really has happened here . . . to decide what must be done about it. If Richard weren't helpless, he would tell us what to do! He would never—" Her voice broke suddenly.

Longdon said patiently, giving Hair an apologetic glance, "Eileen, you know we've gone endlessly over all calculations, tried everything! We . . . ."

"We have not!" Eileen Randall began to weep.

George Hair looked in something like irritated amazement from one to the other of them. He said carefully, "This is, of course, a very serious matter, but I am hardly qualified to assist you in it. It's no secret to you that my connection with the program has been and is a purely figurative one. The only suggestion I can make is that President Mallory should be informed immediately of the problems you've encountered here."

Longdon said tonelessly, "President Mallory is aware of the problem, Mr. Hair."

"What?" Hair said sharply. "When was he told?"

"Over a month ago. As soon as it became evident that Dr. Curtice was not responding normally to the ACCED approach for dememorized subjects." Longdon cleared his throat. "President Mallory's instructions were to maintain absolute secrecy while we looked for a solution. Now, however . . . ." He shrugged.

Over a month ago . . . Hair's mind seemed to check for an instant at the words; then his thoughts were racing as Longdon went on. For more than a month after Mallory and Sebert had realized that the Rejuvenation program might end in humiliating public failure before it had well begun, the build-up had continued, Oliver Wingfield and his adherent were being scientifically needled into a crescendo of

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baffled rage, and Felix Austin—yes, only five days from now, Chief Justice Austin was scheduled to undergo the SELAM techniques which evidently had destroyed Curtice! Hair felt a sudden chill prickling the back of his neck. . . .

"Mr. Hair, you *must* help us!" Eileen Randall was staring desperately at him, tears streaming down her face.

"There's no way I could help you, Dr. Randall."

"But you can—you must! They'll murder Richard if you don't! They've said so! You—your influence with President Mallory—his old friend . . . ." The words drowned in a choked wailing.

HAIR felt his breath shorten. Curtice had to die, of course—die plausibly and conveniently so that his condition need never be revealed. But Mallory and Sebert weren't stupid enough to think that Curtice's death alone would be sufficient.

"It isn't necessary!" Eileen Randall was babbling shrilly again. "Even—even if the program has to end, we could take him away quietly, take care of him somewhere. They could *say* he was dead—no one would ever know! We . . . ." She clapped her hands to her face, turned and ran from the room, making muffled, squalling sounds.

"I should see she's taken care of, Mr. Hair," Longdon said shakily. "If you'll excuse me a minute . . . ." He started for the door.

"Dr. Longdon!"

Longdon stopped, looked back. "Yes?"

"Who suggested to you that I should use my influence with President Mallory on Curtice's behalf?"

Longdon's eyes flickered. "Chief Justice Austin."

"I see," Hair said. "When did he suggest it?"

"This morning," Longdon told him, with a brief, frightened grimace. "He was here shortly before I called you. I could not avoid acknowledging that Dr. Curtice's case was hopeless. The Chief Justice advised us then that only your personal appeal to President Mallory could save Curtice's life, that we should attempt to get in touch with you immediately . . ."

He hurried out of the room. Hair stood staring after him a moment, then turned, glanced at the mindless thing on the sunken bed, went quickly over to the other door through which he and Longdon had entered. There had been, he recalled, a telephone in the outer room.

He dialed the number of his office, waited, listening to the soft purr on the line. Then, suddenly, the line went dead.

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That was that, Hair told himself. He replaced the receiver, went over to the window and looked out at the newly erected buildings of the Rejuvenation complex. His thoughts seemed to be moving sluggishly. Perhaps it was fear; but perhaps it simply had been too long a time since he had been involved in an operation of this kind. After the Takeover, it no longer had seemed necessary; and he had a feeling that what was going on now was somehow unreal.

But it was real enough. Mallory, the man of action, the practical man who intended to remain on top, hadn't forgotten the lessons of the past. He might have been betting on Curtice's genius, but he had been preparing for years to hedge on the bet if necessary. Perhaps he'd never expected ACCED or the Rejuvenation program to come to anything. Either way, he could turn the projects to his advantage in the end.

Hair's gaze shifted for a moment to the sky above the buildings. It would come from there in all likelihood, and in an instant of ravening fury the Rejuvenation complex would be obliterated. The buildings, the personnel, the machines, the records—anything that would have left the slightest possibility of beginning the program again . . . and George Hair, the thinker, the theorist, the living legend, whom Mallory had not forgiven for failing to throw in his influence openly against Wingfield in their first struggle for control.

Wingfield would be blamed for it, and they could make it stick. Wingfield was finished. . . .

Hair turned at a sound behind him. Longdon had come into the room.

"Mr. Hair," he said, grinning apologetically, "you must forgive Eileen! She has always been in love with Curtice, of course. If she is only allowed to take care of him, she will be satisfied. I hope you can persuade President Mallory to leave her that much. . . ."

Hair looked at Longdon's anxious eyes. Longdon hadn't grasped everything, of course, but he had grasped enough to be aware that not only Curtice's life was in danger.

For an instant, Hair wondered how Longdon would react if he were told that communications from the building to the world outside already were being intercepted, and that therefore neither of them—nor anyone else within half a mile of where they stood—could have more than a very few minutes still to live.

But although he had never liked Longdon in the least, that seemed a pointless cruelty now.

"I'll see what I can do, Dr. Longdon," he agreed.

THE END

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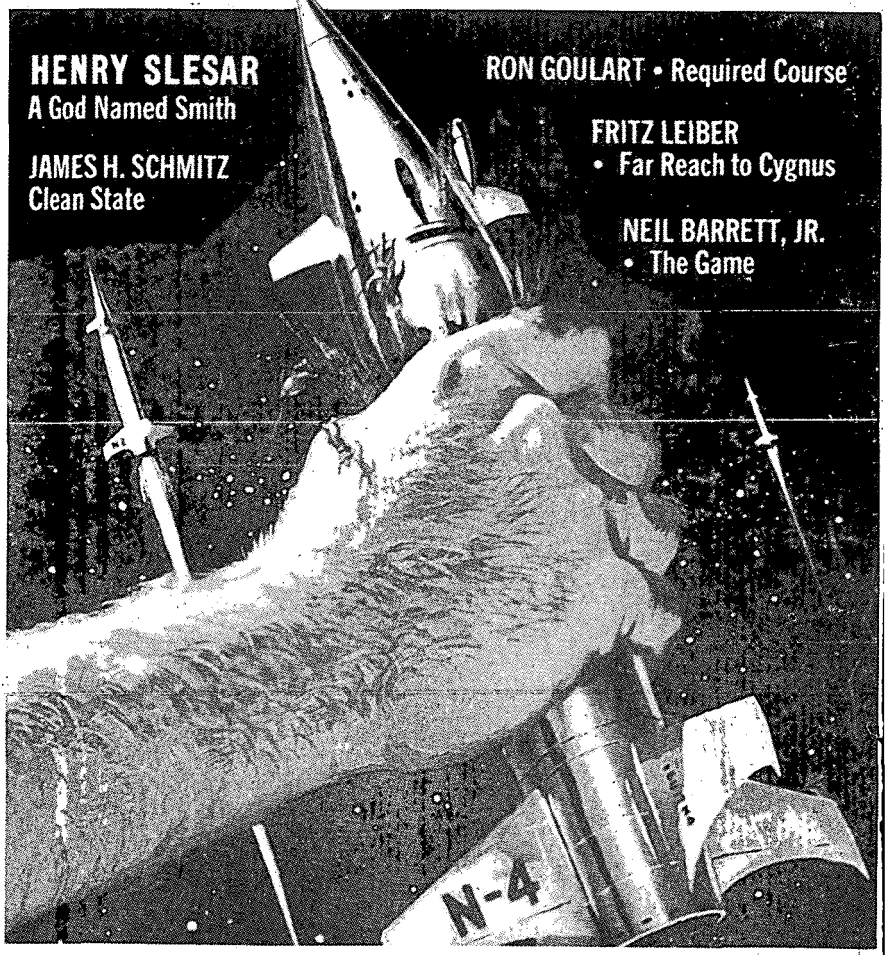

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